



LITTLE JOAN

John Strange Winter





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LITTLE JOAN

LITTLE JOAN

by

John Strange Winter

AUTHOR OF "BOOTLES' BABY,"

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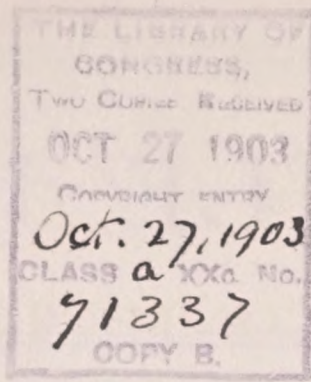
"MARTY," ETC.

(Hawuetta E. V. P. Stannard)



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LITTLE JOAN



CHAPTER I

THE DELAMERES UP THE RIVER

N OBODY quite knew why everyone made a distinction between the Delamere sisters. There were five of them,—yes, five Miss Delameres. There was Miss Maud, who was engaged to Blake of the Black Horse; and there was Miss Norah, who was a learned young woman, and could wear a hood if she liked; there was Miss Agnes, who was churchy; and Miss Violet, who was the beauty of the family and posed as such; and then there was little Joan.

It might be that Joan was physically very different to her four sisters. Maud and Norah, Agnes and Violet were all tall, fine-grown young women, long of limb, small of waist, blue-eyed, auburn-haired, with each of them a wide-smiling mouth which was the embodiment of good nature and good health. Little Joan, who came midway in the quintette, was the strongest possible contrast to her sisters. She was quite a tiny little woman, with a face that would have been purely Madonna had it not been for a decided upward tendency at the end of the nose. Her eyes were grey and serene, her smile was

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satisfying, her voice comforting, her ways tranquil and unirritating, and her nature as clear as crystal.

"You know I am much more dignified than any of you," she said once to her sisters. "You are always larking about, always with something on, always pressing the wine of life to the dregs, so to speak, and I am an uneventful, tranquil person. Yet they call you *Miss Maud*, *Miss Violet*, and so on, and they call me 'Joan,' the first time they ever set eyes upon me; and when they've known me quite a short time they call me 'little Joan.' I can't understand it."

"Well, you are such a mite," said Maudie, looking down from her superior height and over her superior breadth of shoulder at her sister.

"Good stuff is wrapped in little bundles," said Joan, coolly.

"You might have left somebody else to say that," remarked Agnes.

"Yes, I might," answered Joan, quickly. "I should have had to wait, shouldn't I?"

And then the five of them laughed as only girls who are thoroughly happy and thoroughly in accord with each other ever can, or at least ever do, laugh.

Now, the Delameres lived in old Blankhampton. It occurs to me that I haven't written a story about Blankhampton for a long time, so, as the schoolboys say, here goes as regards the story of the Delameres.

The branch of the Delamere family to which I am about particularly to draw your notice is a different

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branch to that portion of it to which I have already introduced my readers. Some of you may remember that there was one Freddy Delamere, who was much enamoured in his extreme youth of a young woman who long ago shook the dust of Blankhampton from off her feet, not with any intention of changing her *venue*, but simply and solely because she married a man who lived in another place than the old city which clusters round the grand old Cathedral, which we who love the place are wont to call the Parish.

The Delameres were a Blankhampton family of very old standing. There are not many families in Blankhampton which can make a similar boast; but that has nothing to do with the story. The Frampton Delameres was the branch to which Freddy belonged; the Tendring Delameres were some second cousins, who lived about five miles away and who had almost forgotten that they were old Cathedral people; and the Delameres up the river were first cousins to the Frampton Delameres, but nobody who did not know the kinship would have taken them for branches off the same tree, for the Frampton Delameres had taken after a podgy mother, and the Delameres up the river had taken after an auburn-haired grandmother.

Mr. Delamere up the river was a lawyer. He held various appointments of more or less legal weight in the old city. He was Clerk to the Justices, he was also Clerk to the Vestry; he had an appointment in the Chapter, and he was solicitor to one of the great endowed schools

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at which the rising youth of Blankhampton receive education. Consequently, although there were five Miss Delameres, to say nothing of three boys in various parts of the world, one in his father's office quickly qualifying for a partnership, and with a distinct view of taking on in due course his father's appointments; one far away in Australia, making railways and acquiring information of a varied character which would surely bring him in a fortune in days to come; and one in an infantry regiment, which, at the time my story opens, was grilling under an Eastern sky; consequently, I say, although there were five Miss Delameres, they had never known what it was to be denied of the reasonable luxuries suitable to their age and position.

Of course I need not tell you that "up the river" was not the postal address of the family, but they lived about half a mile beyond the outskirts of the old city, just near the bend of the river where the public walk was, where the trees hang down to the water's edge, and others stretched great, protecting arms aloft to heaven; where villas ruled high in price and gardens were such as would have driven a denizen of London wild with envy. And the house which was occupied by the Delameres was, I think, the prettiest of any. It went by the name of "Riverside," and the Delameres had a boat-house with a dinghy, several skiffs, and a couple of canoes, on which they were accustomed to disport themselves on the broad surface of the smooth, shining river.

There was a very curious strain in old Blankhampton.

THE DELAMERES UP THE RIVER

Perhaps it is shared by other towns whose population runs in like proportion, but it has never been my lot to know another cathedral town which had quite the same characteristics as old Blankhampton. Not for worlds would the general run of people have spoken of the Delameres as the "Delameres of Riverside." Not a bit of it. When they had left the roomy old house standing back in a court off St. Thomas's Street, where Delamere after Delamere had sat for generations gathering up large fees and little fees, and had bloomed forth into a suburban establishment, they had come to be called "Delameres up the river," and I think "Delameres up the river" they will remain until the end of time.

At the actual opening of my story the household at Riverside was in an unwonted state of excitement. The time was sweet September, an unusually golden month following on a somewhat cold and cheerless August. The time was rapidly approaching for the wedding of Maudie Delamere with Blake of the Black Horse. It was indeed fixed for the fifteenth of the month, and being the first break in the family at Riverside, there was much gathering of the clans, and every branch of the Delamere family seemed to have set itself to vie with all the other branches in the warmth of its expressions of affection and in the richness of its bridal offerings. Naturally, the first daughter to be married of such a man as Robert Delamere, one who held so many public appointments and exercised such a judicious sway over the fortunes of so large a portion of the city,—I say naturally she would be the recipient

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of many tokens of the esteem in which her father was held, and parcel after parcel was left at Riverside, until the family had almost become satiated with gifts.

"How you can be expected to cart all these things about at the tail of the Black Horse is beyond my comprehension," said Agnes Delamere, as she and Maudie unpacked the fifth elaborately embroidered screen which had reached her.

"We can't attempt to cart them about," cried Maudie.

"No," said Agnes. "Well, you can give them away for wedding-presents, that's one comfort. Get mother to give you a room for everything you don't want, and have a list of the things. Have them all packed up in dust-sheets or newspapers, to keep them fresh, and when you want to send a wedding-present, merely write home and give your instructions. If it's somebody you don't care for, send them a fat cushion or a book-slide,—you've got fifteen, I think,—and if it's somebody you do care for, you could send them a screen. Nobody will know. Your ways won't be Blankhampton ways; you'll be on the tramp for the rest of your life."

"I hope not," cried Maudie; "only till Bill gets the regiment."

"And Bill hasn't even got his troop! Well, you'll like it. You were always a peripatetic young party. Hullo, here's Joan! Well, Joan, what have you got there?"

"Another parcel," said Joan. She carried a fat parcel under her left arm, a couple of small ones in her left hand, and a soft bulgy packet before her.

THE DELAMERES UP THE RIVER

"I don't call that another parcel. I call it some parcels."

"Yes, yes," and Joan dumped them down upon the table. "These two came by post and are registered. I think they are jewellery."

"Oh, let's open this first. Stick that fat, podgy cushion thing on one side; it will do afterwards," said the bride-elect with irreverent ingratitude. "Now, let's see who this is from. Oh—h! Agnes! Joan! Oh—h! How lovely! How lovely!" and she held at arm's length a lovely diamond star. "Isn't it divine—isn't it——?"

"Who is it from?" cried Agnes.

"Got the card in your hand," exclaimed Joan.

"What does it matter who it's from? Look at the light on it!"

"Give me the card," cried Joan, wresting it deftly from between her sister's clutching fingers. "Mr. Oswald Mainwaring."

"Why, that's the best man," cried Agnes.

"Oh, of course. What a present to send!" exclaimed Joan with admiration.

"Oh, well, he's Bill's best friend," said Maudie. "He's going to be Bill's best man. They are chums—pals."

"Still, that star is worth——"

"Well, I can't help it. It's a lovely and gorgeous star, and I shall wear it on my wedding-day; you see if I don't."

"My dear," said Agnes, "I wasn't finding any fault with the quality of the star,—it's quite beautiful,—but

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it is an unusually beautiful gift for a best man, even if he is the bridegroom's best pal. He must be very rich."

"Oh, rolling in money," supplemented Joan; "as rich as little Dickey."

"Joan," cried Agnes, laughing, "you love money."

"No, you are quite wrong. I don't love money at all. I like what money brings. Anyone who isn't a fool does that. But money for money's sake has no attraction for me."

"And you don't mean to marry little Dickey?"

"No," said Joan, "I don't think I mean to marry little Dickey."

"Apart from little Dickey," put in the bride-elect, "I fancy that Bill told me that Mr. Mainwaring was rather poor than otherwise,—I have a distinct impression that way,—so don't let any of you girls get too much smitten."

"Is he good-looking?" asked Agnes.

"I don't think he's good-looking. He's one of the adorable ugly kind; just the kind of man that a tiny tot like Joan would fall head over ears in love with. (Mind you don't, Joan, or little Dickey——"

"I wouldn't marry little Dickey," said Joan, solemnly, "not if he was smeared all over in honey and rolled in diamonds."

CHAPTER II

JOAN

IT is astonishing how quickly the days go by when one is preparing for any event. I think the days that come immediately before a wedding slip by with a rapidity which is more marked than before any other event. To the family at Riverside the hours seemed positively to fly at lightning speed. There was so much to do, so many guests to be arranged for, so many people coming to stay, so many presents to inspect and acknowledge, and then to set out in tempting array for the day of the ceremony.

At such times, however, things get scrambled through somehow, and when the day previous to that of the wedding arrived the Delameres up the river felt that they were as much forward with their preparations as any family who had ever had a wedding in this world. The chief events of that day were the arrival in Blankhampton of the groom and his best man, and a large dinner which was to be given at Riverside that evening.

Now, it happened that Maudie Delamere had not made the acquaintance of her bridegroom in her native city. It was years since the Black Horse had been quartered in the cavalry barracks which were but a stone's throw from Riverside. No, Maudie Delamere and Bill Blake had met

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in a pleasant country house a couple of hundred miles away from the old city; had met and fallen in love, as young people ought to do, at first sight. Blake was wealthy, and Maudie would not go to her bridegroom quite empty-handed; so it was, as the lady in whose house the affair had come off had truly said, quite a providential arrangement.

It happened then that the Delamere girls were, with the exception of Blake himself, quite unacquainted with the officers of the Black Horse, and therefore, when the two young men arrived during the course of the afternoon, having established themselves at the Station Hotel, the one was an utter stranger, nobody of the Delamere family having seen him excepting Maudie herself, who had the previous month paid a short visit to one of the married ladies in the regiment.

When the two young men arrived at Riverside, the entire family were gathered together in the drawing-room. It was a long, low room, lighted by five windows overlooking the lawn which led down to the river. A wide, glass-covered veranda ran all along that side of the house. Two of the windows stood wide open to the soft autumn air; the parterres were still gay with flowers; the roses still bloomed about the pillars which supported the roof of the veranda.

It often happens that the actual function of a wedding is a damp and dismal ceremony, but I think there is always an air of jollity about the before and after. Certainly the drawing-room at Riverside was not suggestive

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of there being anything sad or dreary in the wind, and in a moment Bill Blake was, as it were, swallowed up by a bevy of sisters.

For a moment Mr. Mainwaring stood irresolute; then Mrs. Delamere came to the rescue. "Of course you are Mr. Mainwaring," she said, holding out a gracious hand and drawing him towards the fire. "You mustn't take any notice of these feather-headed young creatures, all excited at having a wedding on hand. Come and sit here by me, and I'll give you some fresh tea. It, you see, has followed hard on your heels. Winifred, my dear," she said to a pretty young girl who was sitting near to the tea-table, "let me introduce Mr. Mainwaring to you. This is one of the bridesmaids of to-morrow—Miss Winifred Marchmont."

So Mainwaring straightway sat down and started to make himself agreeable with that singular air of concentration which belongs to the soldier more than to any other man on earth. Miss Marchmont was young and pretty; she was also game for as good a time at the approaching festivities as could well be squeezed out of them; so she favoured the dragoon with the brightest of smiles, and drew her skirts a little on one side so that he might seat himself in comfort.

"Are you quite a stranger?" she began.

"Quite. I have never seen any of the family excepting the bride, and I only saw her once," he replied.

"What a terribly onerous position for you! Well, you see that girl in the pink blouse, tall, and very like the

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bride herself? She's the chief bridesmaid, and therefore she will be your fate to-morrow."

Mainwaring looked up, scanning the five Delamere sisters with good-naturedly critical eyes; saw that four were alike,—tall, auburn-haired, and bonny,—and that the fifth girl was of a totally different type.

"I suppose that little lady in the grey gown is not a Delamere?" he said.

"Indeed she is," said Miss Marchmont. "That is little Joan."

"Little Joan?" echoed Mr. Mainwaring. "Yes—the name suits her."

"Doesn't it? I always think of Joan as some bright-eyed bird. Have you ever held a swallow in your hand and seen that smooth, sleek head, with the quick, half-nervous eye and the general air of neat and tiny elegance? It is true that the name of Joan suits her, but I always thought she ought to have been called Hironnelle."

He laughed at the quaint conceit, and helped himself to a piece of hot cake from the dish which Mrs. Delamere handed to him at that moment. Just then the five sisters came to a realization of the fact that there was a stranger in the room, and the bride came hurriedly across towards them.

"Oh, Mr. Mainwaring," she said, "what did you think of us? You must have thought us the most mannerless crew in the world!"

"I thought you were a preoccupied crew," he said, getting up and smiling down upon her.

JOAN

“Oh, but we are not really. I don’t know what possessed us. It’s the infectious gaiety of Bill’s demeanour. It’s all your fault, Bill, and you know it. Now, you must let me make you known to my sisters.” And then she introduced them one after another, ending up with “And this is the one we call ‘little Joan’.”

“My sisters,” said little Joan, “are all so long and gawky that they can’t forgive me for being what you may call a comfortable pocket edition. So they always label me ‘little Joan’ to everybody. It would be rather hard if it didn’t recoil on their own heads. Let me give you some more tea, Mr. Mainwaring, and do sit down again and go on talking to Winifred.”

The four auburn-haired girls drifted off to various parts of the room, for other people came in just then and they were needed elsewhere than with the group by the tea-table. So Mainwaring sat down again to continue his conversation with Winifred Marchmont, but his eye wandered here and there over the room as little Joan flitted from one room to another. Then, by common consent, they all spread out into the sunlit gardens, some wandering down to the terrace overlooking the river walk, some going to the croquet lawn, and the bride and groom stealing away down a shrubbery which lay on the other side of the house.

“Old chap,” said Mainwaring to Bill Blake, as they walked away towards the town, “you haven’t done badly for yourself at all.”

“Glad you think so, old fellow,” said Billy, looking

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hard in front of him. "You—er—you admire my choice?"

"Oh, immensely, immensely. Admire all of them. What I admire most is the sort of family atmosphere. It is a thing that I have missed all my life."

"Well," said Billy Blake, with a laugh, "it wasn't the home atmosphere that attracted me. I liked it when I saw it, but I had pledged myself before I knew anything about it."

"I don't know so much about that," rejoined the other. "However, you are a lucky dog. I hope you and your bride will be happy, old chap. You know I have never said anything about it to you before, but I shall feel it beastly much when you are married."

"Oh, go along!"

"Yes; it's you that are going along all the same. You know I once stayed at Blankhampton."

"Did you, though?"

"Yes. I came here when the Scarlet Lancers were here. I came for a week to stay with Esmond."

"You don't mean it! Meet anybody?"

"My dear chap, shoals of people. He told them I was the Shah of Persia, or something of that kind."

"Oh, go along!"

"Yes, I know, I know. I did go along just in time. Gad! they'd have married me if I hadn't. Such a queer thing, you know, old chap, that you should choose Blankhampton of all places to come and be married in, when I got so nearly done for when I was here myself."

JOAN

"Yes, it is rather odd. Who was the special charmer?"

"I don't know. It was a crowd, you know."

"What a larkly chap Esmond is! Always taking a rise out of somebody or other."

"Well, he took a rise promptly out of the whole town as soon as I turned up."

"No, but joking apart, who did he say you were?"

"Well, he said I was heir to the Sultan of Morocco, or somebody or other, and, gad! I had the town after me."

"Did you dress the part?"

"No, no. He said I had had a 'Varsity bringing up, and was quite English—ha, ha!"

"Well, that was rather like Esmond. I never stayed with him—never, but I stayed in the same house. He's a larkly chap. Then you may expect to be paid a good deal of attention during the next few days."

"I suppose I may, if any of them recognize me. Perhaps they won't."

"Old chap," said Billy Blake, giving his friend a vigorous dig with his elbow such as almost sent him headlong into the road, "old chap, don't be downhearted. One of these days all your collaterals will work straight, and then you'll find a fate of your own, and you'll settle down and create a home atmosphere for yourself. Mind you, I'm not sneering at it. It's awfully jolly when you get it. I've always had it, and that's why perhaps I don't value it as much as you do. And now that all my sisters are married and gone to India, and my mother has taken

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it into her head to get married again and go and live in Italy, I've missed it. And that's one reason why I've wanted to get married. I was so sick of having nowhere to go when I went on leave. Going to stay in other people's houses isn't quite the same thing. The best thing you can do, Ozzie, is to marry a girl with a lot of money."

"Is it?" said Mainwaring. "Well, do you know I rather doubt that?"

"I never did believe in any of that rot about mercenary marriages," Billy Blake went on. "Can anybody pretend that my young woman is going to marry a lot of money, and that she wouldn't have married me if I hadn't as many hundreds as I have thousands? Bosh, I tell you, bosh! She's going to marry me because she's in love, and I'm in love; we're both in love. And I tell you, sir, it's a damned good thing to be in love, too. I only wish I had met her five years ago, before I wasted so much over other people."

"If you met her five years ago you mightn't have liked her."

"Yes, I should. It's the only regret I've got in the world, Ozzie—nothing gives one back those five years."

CHAPTER III

NOT A HITCH

BILL BLAKE and Maud Delamere were married in the Cathedral, that splendid fane which familiarly goes by the name of the Parish. It was not anybody or everybody in the old city of Blankhampton who was privileged to command special services in the cathedral church. Among his many appointments, Mr. Delamere held one which had to do with the Dean and Chapter, and he was thereby as an official privileged to the extent that members of his family might be wed in the glorious old church.

It was a pretty wedding. Between ourselves, a country wedding is often much prettier than one which takes place in a large centre of human life. People in London may or may not attend such functions—it is as the fancy of the moment seizes them; in a country town it is a point of honour to do so. Then, again, very few spectators go to a London wedding, unless it is one of very great public interest; in a place like Blankhampton half the town turns out to see a popular girl take the step which will probably separate her from her native city for ever. So with the Delameres. From generation to generation the Delameres had wooed and wedded, had lived and died in the shadow of the old Cathedral; and all sorts and

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conditions of people went to see the eldest daughter of the house married to her dragoon. "The flower of the flock" a good many called her, but they were not those who admired little Joan.

It was a glorious morning, typical bride's weather, with a radiant sun overhead and not a tear to mar the brightness of the occasion. Even Mrs. Delamere did not think it necessary to be unduly lachrymose.

"You bore it very well, Mrs. Delamere," said one dame, the mother of several ungainly daughters. "I consider your fortitude absolutely marvellous."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Delamere; "I didn't feel the need of any fortitude. I'm delighted at the match Maudie is making. So long as a girl marries the man of her heart, that's the principal thing. Mr. Blake is certainly the man of Maudie's heart, and one cannot wonder at it."

"Ah, that's a way of putting it, but your mother's soul must have been sick within you."

"I beg your pardon, it was nothing of the kind. My mother's soul is absolutely delighted that my girl should be marrying such an extremely desirable and personable young man. Mr. Delamere and I have always had the same feeling about our girls—that they should marry where their hearts dictate."

"It's such a risk," said the dame.

"Yes, but everything's a risk in this world—everything, and one must take the risk if one wants to have the prizes. It's a grand thing to look on the bright side, Mrs. Perkyns."

NOT A HITCH

"You seem to find it easy, my dear," said the other. "For my part, I should be heartbroken if I was losing one of my girls."

"I'm not losing my girl," Mrs. Delamere maintained stoutly. "But do go and have some breakfast, Mrs. Perkyins. You mustn't go without seeing Maudie's presents; they're quite beautiful."

"Heartless woman!" said the dame to her eldest hope.

"You never did like her, mother," rejoined the girl.

"Perhaps I didn't," said the lady. "However, we'll go and get some breakfast, and then we'll look at the presents. Judging by Mrs. Delamere's voice, they must be handsome."

Half an hour later the amiable lady met another like unto herself in the library, where the presents were laid out for inspection. "It seems to me that Maudie Delamere has done very well for herself," she remarked.

"Extremely well, my dear. The man has given her the most lovely collet necklace of diamonds, and the little minx never wore it. Such mock humility!"

"And did you see the star given by the best man? He seems awfully taken with little Joan. He's never left her side once since they got home from church."

"Of course, they've never introduced him to anybody," said the other lady. "But I think the wedding went off very well."

"Yes. A little ostentatious, don't you think? Those

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favours in church, and the little pages in white satin suits with diamond pins, and all that nonsense, and a wedding-cake three feet high. Oh, it is absurd!"

"Well, Robert Delamere has a good many people to remember."

"Oh, I don't blame him for doing the thing well once in a way. And, after all, she's making a very good match, as you can see by the presents."

"And a very good-looking young man," said Mrs. Perkyns's eldest hope, who turned from a table at that moment.

"Handsome is as handsome does, my dear," said the other lady.

The girl turned aside with a mutinous air, as if she resented the little cut-and-dried aphorism of her mother's crony. She herself had a weakness, poor child, for the outward and visible sign, and so honestly thought Maud Delamere the luckiest girl in the wide world,—which perhaps she was.

At that moment one of the tall daughters of the house approached them. "Oh, Marjorie," she said, addressing herself to Mrs. Perkyns's eldest hope, "there's a man here who's awfully anxious to make your acquaintance. May I introduce him to you?"

"Oh, yes, thanks," said Marjorie Perkyns, flushing all over her pale face and looking quite pretty for the moment.

Agnes Delamere flitted away, appearing almost immediately with a tall young man by her side. "Let me in-

NOT A HITCH

troduce Mr. Rupert Blake," she said. "Miss Marjorie Perkyns."

Mr. Rupert Blake, who was young and extremely good-looking, bowed very deferentially to Marjorie. "Have you had any refreshments?" he asked her.

"Yes, I've been into the dining-room."

"I don't believe you got much. There was an awful crush just now. Do come back and let me give you some more. Er—are you any relation of the bride's?" he went on, in a high-pitched voice, as they moved away.

Her reply was inaudible to the mother and the other lady, but his next remark came floating back to them.

"Well, I'm about a third cousin of Billy Blake's, and a great pal of his. I feel as if I were kind of responsible for things to-day. Eh, what?"

"I should think," said Mrs. Perkyns to the other lady, "that he asked to be introduced to Marjorie."

"Well, she said he did," said the other lady promptly.

Truth to say, I did not set out to tell the story of Billy Blake's third cousin and Marjorie Perkyns. It is an incident, and it is closed. There may be a history later on; time will show. I told the incident just that I might show that the Delameres up the river did things very well on that wedding-day. Indeed, everything went off without a single hitch, and when at last the happy pair went gaily off on the journey which would last them all their lives the universal verdict was that the Delameres up the river had one and all behaved beautifully.

"They're gone," said little Joan, turning round as the

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carriage passed the entrance gates, and speaking to no one in particular. "They're gone. It's all over."

"But a shout," suggested someone immediately in the rear.

She looked round. The best man was standing just behind.

"Yes, yes, all over but a shout," she acquiesced; "and I don't know, since the shout is to take the form of a dance, that it won't be the best part of it."

"For my part," he said, "I feel that my duties, my very onerous duties, are all at an end. I have never been best man before. I thought it not improbable that I might have to provide *sal volatile* for the bridegroom this morning, and hold him up when he got to the altar. But old Billy was as cool as I ever saw him in this world."

"Well, nobody asked him to marry Maudie, you know," said little Joan.

"No, I suppose they didn't. 'Pon my word, I was much more nervous than he was."

"I don't see what you had to be nervous about."

"Well, I had never been best man before."

"Well, he had never been married before."

"No, no, you are right there. And I don't want ever to be best man again."

"Why not? Haven't you enjoyed it?"

"Yes, I've enjoyed it; but I don't like playing second fiddle."

"You wouldn't have liked to be bridegroom, would you?"

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"Just shouldn't I!" was his prompt reply.

"Well, it's very easy."

"Not so easy; by no means so easy."

"I don't know," said Joan, a curious little flicker coming across her *riante* face, "I never—tried."

She turned back to go into the house, and he, passing with her, they entered, finding themselves quite alone in the outer hall. There was a huge old couch covered with some handsome furs in one corner.

"Sit down here awhile," said Mainwaring, drawing her towards the comfortable seat. "Nobody wants us in there. There are a lot of old cats who want to see the wedding-presents,—mercenary old things! You don't want to see them. I don't want to see them."

"Don't you?" said Joan.

"No, I don't; you know I don't. At present I only want to see one thing in the world."

"And that?" said she.

"Well, that is just what I *do* see. Now, do tell me, Miss Joan, which of you arranged this corner?"

Joan shook her head. "I don't know. It's been there ever since I can remember. I was eight years old when I came to this house. I think it's always been there. Why?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. I thought it was a sensible arrangement, that was all."

"We think it's rather nice," said Joan. "We often sit here. When there's a fire in the winter, it's awfully jolly."

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“Awfully jolly! I wish you would ask me to come when you’ve got a fire in the winter.”

“Oh, you are funny! You don’t mean to say you would come all the way to Blankhampton just to see this wretched little hall with a fire in the winter?”

“Not exactly to see the wretched little hall, even with a fire in the winter, but to see—other things.”

“Ah, yes,” said Joan, “I begin to take your meaning. Well, perhaps if you are very good and very civil during the next few hours, you may find the way to my mother’s heart. It’s not as a rule difficult.”

“Couldn’t you give me a short cut?” said he.

“No,” she said, “I don’t think I could. There are not any short cuts to my mother’s favour. You must work out your own salvation, Mr. Mainwaring.”

“I’ll have a try for it,” said Mainwaring, heartily. “I say, Miss Joan!”

“Well?”

“It would be rather odd, wouldn’t it, if we got transferred to Blankhampton?”

“Oh, the Black Horse have been at Blankhampton before. I remember them quite well.”

“They haven’t been for a long time.”

“No, they haven’t. But they made themselves very much at home when they were here.”

“What, did they paint the town red?”

“No, I don’t know that they did that,” said Joan, with a laugh. “It wasn’t exactly a case of painting the town red, but they, most of them, married Blankhampton girls.”

NOT A HITCH

"If they come here and do it again," said Mainwaring, "Billy will be able to say that he is well ahead of the fashions."

"Oh, they won't do it again. It was an accident," said the girl, smiling.

"Well, it might be an accident. Perhaps there might be no accident about it. I can understand a man quartered in Blankhampton marrying a Blankhampton girl."

"Well, I," said Joan, with a gay little laugh, "must say that I can't understand anybody marrying anybody else in Blankhampton."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Blankhampton people scarcely ever marry each other. When they do, I think, on the whole, they are rather ashamed of the fact."

"Are Blankhampton young men so insensible?" asked Mainwaring.

"I never knew but one fellow who was really—really, you know—no half measures, but the real thing—over head and ears in love with a Blankhampton girl."

"And he married her?"

"No, he didn't marry her," said Joan, sadly. "He was one of my cousins. She went away and married somebody else."

CHAPTER IV

LITTLE GIRL

THE wedding was an event three days gone by. The time was five o'clock in the afternoon. The scene was the same cosy corner in the hall at Riverside. The characters were Joan Delamere and Oswald Mainwaring.

"But I thought," Joan was saying, "that you only came to Blankhampton for three days."

"So I did, but I had ten days' leave."

"Oh! What did you intend to do with the rest?"

"Well, I intended to go to town."

"Why didn't you go?"

"Because I am very happy where I am. You see, little girl, when I promised to go and see old Billy turned off, I thought that three days—the day before, the wedding-day, and the day after the wedding-day—would suffice to see me comfortably through it. I didn't know I should find—well, just what I did find at the end of the journey."

Joan traced with a small white finger the pattern of the flower on her muslin gown. "What did you find?" she asked.

"I found a little girl," said Mainwaring.

"Yes. Well, I suppose you mean—I suppose you mean me."

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"Of course I mean you," he replied. "I found just what I had been looking for ever since I could remember anything."

"Meaning me?" said Joan. Her voice trembled a little, and so did the finger.

"Is there anybody else that I could mean?" said Mainwaring, keeping his eyes fixed upon her. "There isn't another little girl in the house, ha, ha! They're all bouncing big ones. Don't think I don't admire Bill's choice. I do. Your sister will suit Bill down to the ground. He always liked big girls; I never did. So when I found,"—then he made an eloquent pause,—“when I found a little girl, I felt that I could put in the ten days of my leave very comfortably at Blankhampton.”

"And you are going to stay another week?"

"I am going to stay to the last hour that I can."

For a moment there was silence. They were not very near together; indeed, Joan was sitting bolt upright in the very middle of the long seat, and Mainwaring was leaning back in great comfort in one corner of it.

Suddenly she turned and looked at him. "I—I don't know who gave you leave to call me 'little girl,' Mr. Mainwaring," she said. "I think it's rather a—a cheek."

"Do you? But you are a little girl."

"Yes, I am; but it is not for you to tell me so, or to call me so, is it?"

"I think it is. Look here, little girl," he went on, "joking apart, if we should have the luck to get trans-

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ferred to Blankhampton, you would be rather pleased, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come now, you know just as well as I do. Why should we sham to each other?"

"I have only known you three days," she said, demurely.

"Is it only three days?"

"Well, four days."

"Is it only four days? Has it been four years, or four centuries? Do you know, little girl, I think I must have known you ages and ages and ages ago in some other incarnation."

"You don't believe all that?"

"I don't know that I disbelieve it. It's hard to believe or to disbelieve anything. I have a sort of feeling that I knew you once somewhere or other. Tell me, do you never feel that you have lived before?"

"Oh, yes, often and often. I feel that I sat here in this corner and talked to you, or to somebody like you, yesterday—or was it last week? or was it last century? I don't know, I don't know. But we didn't sit here yesterday; we were ten miles away. It's a trick of the brain; it isn't real."

"I've never been sure of that. I'm not sure of it now," said he. "But I can tell you this for certain—when I came into your mother's drawing-room the day before the wedding, just behind old Billy, and she promptly introduced me to a rather pretty girl who was

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sitting on the sofa, I was watching you all the time, and wondering and wondering where I had seen you before. You were perfectly familiar to me."

"Was I?"

"Perfectly. It was a shock to me when I found that you were one of the daughters of the house, because I knew I had never seen any one of them excepting the bride in all my life before."

"I'm like somebody you know," suggested Joan.

"I don't think so. Yours isn't a common type."

Joan jumped up with an evident desire to change the conversation. "There is the common or garden tea-bell," she cried gaily, and as the words passed her lips the sound of a clanging tea-bell was heard in the inner hall.

"Now, how in the name of wonder," said he, "did you know that that bell was going to ring? I'll swear there wasn't a sound, or an indication of it, before you spoke."

"Oh, yes, there was. I heard William come out of the dining-room, and I knew he was going to ring the bell. There's nothing clairvoyant about it, I assure you. Come, let's be first in the dining-room and get a start of the others."

The romance of the moment was over. Mainwaring drew a long breath and shook himself out of his semi-mystic mood into a semblance of the typical every-day dragoon.

"Look here, I say, Miss Joan," he said, in his ordinary dragoon voice, as he followed her into the dining-room,

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“couldn’t you come out on the river for an hour after we have had tea?”

“Yes, if you like.”

“Can you get away without the others knowing? It’s such a bore going about in a drove; don’t you think so?”

“I hate it,” said Joan, “because a drove is always so noisy, and I hate a noise.”

“So do I—loathe it. That’s why I like that couch in the corner. By the bye,” he said, standing at the tea-table and watching the girl pour out two cups of tea, “by the bye, I’ve got a bit of news for you.”

“Have you really?”

“Yes; I had a letter from Jackson of ours this morning.”

“Yes? You do take sugar, don’t you?”

“Thanks, yes.”

“Two lumps?”

“Yes, please.”

“And what did Mr. Jackson say?”

“Jackson? He’s senior captain, you know.”

“I beg his mighty pardon. I’m so sorry. Well, what did his mightiness say? Is he a great friend of yours?”

“Yes, he’s a great friend of mine, and he tells me that there’s more than a chance that we shall be shifted to Blankhampton in February—that is to say, the beginning of March.”

“You don’t say so!”

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"I do. I was hoping it, I felt almost sure of it. Rather jolly, won't it be? particularly having your sister in the regiment."

"What's that?" said a gay voice at the door.

"Well, it's great news," answered Joan, settling down in her place at the long table. "Mr. Mainwaring says that there's more than a chance that the Black Horse will be transferred to Blankhampton in the spring."

"You don't say so! Joan, I think you are a little beast."

"Why?"

"You might have poured me out a cup of tea when you saw me at the door."

"Not at all. Every man for himself—you know the rest. In this instance you are one of the hindmost. You see, Mr. Mainwaring," Joan continued, looking up at him, "we're an outspoken family. I, being the little one, would be at the beck and call of all my long and strong sisters. Little people have to look after themselves. So Agnes can pour out her own tea."

"All right, all right; I shall remember it against you," said Agnes with ineffable good nature. "So," turning to Mr. Mainwaring, "you think you are coming to Blankhampton. That will be very nice."

"I must say if I were Maudie I would rather not," said Joan.

"But why?" asked Mainwaring.

"Oh, I think the people you have known all your life are rather a bore. If you are going to live among them,

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well and good; if you are just going to live among them for a year or less, or a little more, not so well and good."

"I wonder where they'll pitch their tent," said Agnes.

"I know where I shall pitch mine," said Mainwaring.

"Oh, won't you live in barracks?" cried Agnes.

"Yes, yes, I shall live there, but I shall inflict myself pretty often at Riverside."

"I daresay you will. You will be very welcome. I'm glad you are coming in some ways. By the bye, I thought you were only going to stay three days, Mr. Mainwaring?"

"I had ten days' leave," said Mainwaring, helping himself to another chunk of hot cake.

"Oh, ten days' leave? I see. You are going to spend them in Blankhampton?"

"I think so."

"Ah, well, that's very nice; it speaks well for the place. Joan, where are all the others?"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea," answered Joan. "What are you going to do after tea, Aggie?"

"Oh, I have to go to Mrs. Desmond's. I'm due there at six o'clock to the minute, otherwise I shan't get my pink dress, and if I don't have it I can't go to Strathfield."

"You are going away?" said Mainwaring.

"Yes, I'm going away on Thursday. The Gowers of Strathfield are great friends of mine, and they've got the house full next week."

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Agnes Delamere was just going out of the dining-room when Mrs. Delamere came in.

"Oh, am I late?" she cried. "Dear, dear! No, don't ring the bell, Agnes, don't ring the bell, dear. This teapot will do for me. I have had such a tiresome afternoon; people coming and going all the time. Everybody going on to Mrs. Perkyns's. Are you going, Joan?"

"I don't think so, darling."

"Well, I must. I've ordered the carriage to be round in ten minutes. I hope William won't let anybody else in. Where are you going?"

"Oh, we're going on the river a little while."

"Well, put a coat on; it's rather chilly."

"Is it really?"

"Yes, I think so. You won't be the worse for a coat, at all events. Take it with you, and don't be late, because, remember, we are dining at half-past seven to-night."

"At half-past seven? Why?"

"Because of the concert."

"Oh, of course."

"What concert is that?" asked Mainwaring.

"It's a concert in the village school-room about a mile off, at Waterbank. It's for the church. So we dine at half-past seven, Mr. Mainwaring."

Mainwaring turned back and looked with some little hesitation at Mrs. Delamere. "Mrs. Delamere," he said, "I feel rather—I feel rather a bit of a fraud."

"Do you?"

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“ Well, you see, you were kind enough to ask me to dine with you on the evenings I was in Blankhampton, but I—I came for three days, and I—I don’t like to inflict myself on you in quite an unconscionable manner.”

“ My dear Mr. Mainwaring,” said the lady, indulgently, “ we’re such an enormous family that one more or less makes little or no difference to us. If you want to dine with friends, well, that is your affair; but there’s no reason why you should dine by yourself at a hotel, leaving an empty place at our table.”

“ You are awfully kind,” he murmured.

“ But if you are going on the river,” Mrs. Delamere went on, “ you two, make haste and go before it’s too late. Don’t go too far, Joan.”

“ No, no, mother,” said Joan, “ I’ll be most careful. Come along, Mr. Mainwaring, or the others will be in, and we shall be overwhelmed in a sea of idle talk.”

She caught up a hat from its place in the hall, and throwing a loose light coat over her thin frock, she led the way across the garden to the boat-house by the river.

CHAPTER V

THE END OF THE FIRST PHASE

THE end of Oswald Mainwaring's leave had come. A ten days' leave does soon come to an end in the ordinary course of events, and when the ten days have been passed in an atmosphere particularly stimulating and agreeable, it is astonishing how the hours seem to fly.

Mainwaring and little Joan had the Riverside garden to themselves, for the entire family were gone off in various directions on expeditions and jaunts of their own. As a matter of fact, the two were down on the raised terrace which overlooked the public walk between the Riverside boundary and the river itself. It was a favourite resort of the whole family. There was a long, low, and exceedingly substantial summer-house, with cushioned seats and a sort of outlook, a kind of windowless window, where those who wished could lean and view any traffic, pedestrian or aquatic, that might be passing by.

It was in this corner that Mainwaring and little Joan found themselves that afternoon.

"I think," Joan was saying, "that you were rather foolish not to go this morning."

"I don't," returned Mainwaring, sturdily; "nothing of the kind. It's true I shall have to travel pretty much all the night, but that won't matter."

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“What will you do after you get to London, until it’s time to start for Danford?”

“Oh, it’s quite simple. I’ve done it before—stay in the waiting-room or go out and put in the time at a coffee-stall. Quite simple. Many a good breakfast I’ve had at a London coffee-stall waiting for the morning train. So long as I get down to Danford in time for officers’ call, that’s all that is necessary.”

“I don’t see what you gain by it,” persisted Joan.

“Don’t you? You would if you were me. I gain a whole half-day. I’ve had all this glorious afternoon alone with you; I shall have tea alone with you, since all the others are out; and then we shall have a couple of hours to spend just as we please. That’s the beauty of your people; they don’t bore one with questions. Then we shall have a last dinner and evening together, and I shall have a scramble to catch the mail; but it’s worth it; oh, yes, little girl, it’s worth it.”

He took her hand in his and drew her to the wicker lounging seat which just held two, at the back of the shelter. It was the first time that he had ever done so, and Joan resisted the innovation.

“No, no,” she said, “we’re going up to the house. It’s tea-time.”

“When it’s tea-time the estimable William will ring the bell,” said he. “Come, little girl, don’t be standoffish and hard. It’s our last afternoon together. You don’t want me to go away thinking that I am nothing to you?”

“You are nothing to me,” said Joan, perversely.

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"Am I not? You want to make believe that you are nothing to me? Oh, little girl, it won't wash. You know exactly what we are to each other."

"No, I don't," said Joan, wilfully.

"Oh! Well, since you say you don't, why, I'll tell you. We're everything in the world to each other, aren't we?" He had still possession of her hand. Joan had made no further attempt to draw it away, but it was a passive, unresisting little hand, whose presence within his might mean anything or nothing. "Come," said he, giving it a little shake to and fro, "haven't you anything to say?"

"I don't know that I have," said Joan.

"Really? Must I say it all, and just take your answer by deduction? Oh, little girl, little girl, why is anything alive made as bewitching as you are?"

"I might say something on my side," said Joan.

"Say it, say it," he urged.

"No, I don't think I will say it. You mightn't think it polite."

"I hope I shouldn't—not in the way you mean. There's no need of that kind of politeness between you and me. We've gone beyond that, little girl, and you know it as well as I do. Come, you are not going to send me away in doubt, miserable, sick at heart, not knowing just the plain blunt truth? We've got a lot to talk of, you and I. I've got a lot to tell you, a lot to ask you. There are a great many things I want you to do for me. It won't be all plain sailing. I had no right to tell you I loved you; I have no right to ask you to give your love to me. I am

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a fraud, Joan, an utter fraud, going about in the guise of a man of position, living in a wealthy set on twopence."

"Oh, what do I care!"

"You must care. We've all got to care. We may pretend we don't, but it isn't true—at least, only sometimes; and when that sometimes happens and we really don't care, and money has no weight with us, circumstances come in and force us against our will. Little girl, I *want* to take you away right out of this to-morrow—no, I don't—I want to take you to-night—now. Circumstances are dead against me. I can't go to your father, as is customary in our class, ask his consent and all the rest of it. He'd look me up and down, and ask me what I meant to keep you on."

"Yes, he would," said Joan, faintly.

"Of course he would. It's his right; it's his duty. And yet, I can't help loving you. Do you know I loved you the first moment I set eyes on you; and it wasn't a new love, little girl. I told you as much once before. It was an old love—centuries, ages old. We lived together somewhere else. I believe it was on the banks of Isis. Can't you remember anything about it? Or did we sit in some Tribune in the old Roman days? Think. Isn't this very spot familiar to you?"

"Well, we have sat here often enough of late," said Joan; "it ought to be."

"I don't mean in that way. Carry your mind back——"

Joan drew her slim little fingers away from the zealous

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clasp of his, and fell to her favourite occupation of tracing out the pattern on her frock. "I can't remember anything," she said. "I liked you—I mean I liked your looks the first time, the day before the wedding, when you came with Billy. I thought you were smart, and——"

"Well," he said, "go on."

"Oh, I may as well tell you. You'll have it out of me sooner or later. I don't want to look back. We may have known each other ages ago, in classic Greece, in stately Rome, in clear and cloudless Egypt—I don't know. What does it matter?"

"Doesn't it matter?"

"No," she said, "I don't think it matters one little scrap." Then she looked up at him with her velvet-soft eyes and said what would have turned the heads of most men: "Isn't the present good enough?"

It was all up with him then. It was a complete declaration. "Little girl, little girl!" he cried, "don't you know what it is that you do? Don't you know the temptation you throw in my way?"

"No," said Joan, "I certainly never threw myself at you."

"Threw yourself at me? It would have been no temptation if you had. I believe it's the very fact that you didn't that has made me so hopelessly yours as I am. And yet, I don't think it's that—no, I don't know what it is. It's *you*."

"And perhaps a little that it's you," said Joan, softly.

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“Didn’t I say,” cried he, triumphantly, “that we were everything to each other?”

It seemed like it. His hand released hers; his arm stole about her. The pathways of their lives had met once more and touched. How long they would run side by side, whether they would merge into one, whether they would wander far away from each other, the future alone knew. It was enough for them that they had met and touched.

The tea-bell rang and rang again, and yet a third time, with a decent interval between each; and at last Joan shook herself out of that day-dream and brought him back to things mundane and domestic.

“Come, come, there’s the tea. I believe the bell rang before. William will think we’ve eloped, or are mad, or something.”

“It doesn’t matter what William thinks,” said Mainwaring.

She was already upon her feet, a dainty little figure in dove-grey cloth. He was still sitting, and he leant his head back against the wall of the summer-house and looked at her with half-closed eyes. Then he put out a strong, half-lazy arm and drew her back again.

“Kiss me again, Joan,” he said, “before we go back into the cold world.”

“The world?” said Joan, almost faintly.

“Yes, the chill, cold, unsympathetic world, where you and I have got to play a part from this moment, where you and I have got to pretend that we are nothing to

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each other, where we've each got to pretend we don't take any interest in what the other does, where for a time, Joan, you and I have got to live a lie. But you'll live it for me, won't you? you'll bear everything for me, you'll keep your eyes fixed on the good time ahead? You'll not let some other fellow come along, another Billy Blake, and tempt you with everything that I can't give you?"

"No," said Joan; "that I'll never do. And, after all, money hasn't any great attraction for me. I don't care for money, scarcely for the things that money can buy."

"You don't care, because you don't know. You have lived here—I daresay you think you live in quite a modest way; that your big house, and your gardens, and your summer-house, and your boats, and your pretty frocks, all your unpretentious hospitality, open table and all that sort of thing, costs little money. Joan, you can't do it under four or five thousand a year. I haven't got four or five hundred. I've got crops of debts, and my prospects are nil. My father married for love on three hundred a year and his pay. There were six of us; if his cousin hadn't helped him out with school bills we should never have been educated at all."

"Who was his cousin?"

Mainwaring looked a trifle surprised. "Lord Moresby," he said.

"Oh, really? I didn't know you belonged to that family."

"My family is all right," said Mainwaring, "if only one could live upon it. There was a chance once that I

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might succeed my father's cousin, being the eldest of our tribe; but that hope was blighted long years ago, and young Kenneth Mainwaring is as fine a young man as you could find in any of the Guards' regiment. He's had all the luck I never had——" There was a moment's silence. Then he took her by the chin and turned her face round to him. "Always knocking off the one piece of luck that has always been mine, that you and I should meet again."

"How you harp upon that string!" said Joan; and she said it in a tone which showed that the idea was not displeasing to her.

CHAPTER VI

CHANGE OF QUARTERS

IF the Black Horse had remained in their hated and detested quarters at Danford until the customary spring shuffle, it is probable that I should have had no story to tell,—at least, I might have no story to tell you,—but by an unexpected change of events they were moved to the snug cavalry barracks at Blankhampton about the middle of the month following Maudie Delamere's wedding.

The real truth was that the wife of the commanding officer of the Black Horse took a loathing for Danford, which meant that, unless she could live elsewhere, her husband would leave the regiment. As her husband had but just got command, and was a highly valued officer, and had, moreover, enormous influence in high places, the change was effected, and the Black Horse knew before the end of the first week in October that they would be very soon en route for that favourite garrison, Blankhampton.

Mr. and Mrs. Billy Blake had not even thought of taking a house at Danford, having indeed not got through their marriage leave when the change of quarters was made known. They therefore returned, after a very short honeymoon, to Riverside, and there stayed a few days

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in order that they might reconnoitre the neighbourhood; not that, of course, Maudie did not know it, but, you see, she had never looked upon it in the light of a marriage residence.

They were not many hours in snapping up a little gem of a house which stood on the river's bank, some three or four hundred yards farther out of town than Riverside itself. It was called River Walk Cottage, and was usually given up to the needs of married officers quartered in the garrison.

You can imagine, my dear reader, the thrill of joy with which the news of the forthcoming change was received by at least one person at Riverside when she first heard it. Little Joan turned rosy red, and then ghastly white, taking the first chance of getting away to her own room, which, being the middle sister, she did not share with anybody, and there flung herself upon the bed and tried to realize what it would mean to her. He had been gone already more than a week, he had not written her one word, he had not made one sign, he had not asked her to write to him. So he was coming to Blankhampton to live. He would be just up the road, and she would see him every day, or almost every day, perhaps for two long years. And then—well, perhaps then there would be the deluge.

But what was the good of thinking about what would happen two years ahead? He was coming back. She upraised herself from the little couch where she took her rest, and went to her writing-table by the window. A few

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late roses still nodded their pinched faces against the pane, as much as to say: "We are still here. It is still summer." But the window was closed. Little Joan opened a drawer at the back of the little cupboard in the middle of the desk with a key which hung among a bunch of charms on the long chain that she wore about her neck, and took from it a photograph in a big envelope. Of course, it was a photograph of him, and underneath the gaily garbed figure was written: "Ozzie. September 25th. To my darling."

So he was coming back. Oh, it was almost too good to be true! And nobody knew. They had chaffed her a little about it down-stairs, they had asked her if life was blank and dreary now, they had hinted that if anybody wanted anything they could demand it of little Joan, because her occupation was gone. They had even gone so far as to call her Othello. Oh, how silly it all was! And he was coming back again, and they were all blind to it.

Well, they would have to be very careful. They would have to give it out that they were great pals, sworn chums, nothing more. As for marrying,—marrying was all rubbish, and only to be thought of as a sort of *dernier resort*. Meantime she was heart and soul possessed of the one idea—Ozzie was coming back again. Ozzie was going to be just up the road; Ozzie was going to be a daily dish.

Maudie said about this time that it was a curious thing that Joan was extraordinarily helpful. "All you girls are as lazy as lazy can be—perfect idle bones," she remarked

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one evening, when she had been at home four or five days. "Not a stitch, that is to say, not a stroke will any of you do for a poor woman that's got a husband to look after. But Joan's quite different; Joan's always ready with a helping hand, always sympathetic, always eager and willing to fill the odd moment."

"I suppose," said Agnes, "you'll try to make out that you and Joan are a pair, and we are the odd ones. Don't you flatter yourself, my dear Mrs. Billy Blake. You and we are one, and Joan is the odd man out. Joan has the different nature; Joan has the different personality. Joan is unique; you are only one of a set. So don't you try it on, Mrs. Billy Blake, not a bit of it—we're not taking any this time."

So the gay idle gossip was thrown to and fro, and it served somewhat more than its purpose in helping to keep Joan's doings, Joan's feelings, and Joan's predilections from further notice.

And in due course of time the Black Horse straggled in troop by troop to their new quarters. Mainwaring was one of the last to reach them. He arrived with his men about two o'clock in the day, having had but a short march for the last day's work. If he had followed his inclination, he would have changed his clothes, getting out of his paint for mufti, and gone straight down to Riverside; but he felt it was necessary to dissemble somewhat, so he spent the afternoon in looking after the settlement of his quarters, and did not go down to Riverside until late the following afternoon.

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Joan knew, of course, that he had arrived the previous day. She had waited with her heart in her mouth for every knock that came to the door between five and seven. If he had come then he would have found her quite alone. Two of her sisters had gone up to the cottage to have tea with Maudie, and Violet was somewhere in the town on some quest of her own. Mrs. Delamere was that afternoon on a committee,—a committee for in some way alleviating the condition of the poor at Blankhampton, a meeting which always lasted a couple of hours, and ended up with a very merry tea at the house of its president. So Joan, having a slight cold, was alone. Well, he hadn't chosen to come. Perhaps he did not care still.

When he did come he found the whole family gathered together in the long drawing-room, with the addition of several cousins, Billy Blake and his wife, and half a dozen people whom he did not know. Even then he did not straightway join Joan, but sat down by her mother, with whom he talked for quite a quarter of an hour,—indeed, until somebody else came into the room and claimed her attention. Then, in a leisurely manner, he got up, and, casting his eyes slowly around, went carelessly and casually across the room to where Joan was sitting.

“Well, Miss Joan, I'm back again, you see,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Yes, I see you are back again,” said Joan. Her manner was bright, and if her heart was as solid as lead, and as heavy, she hid it uncommonly well. “Let me introduce you to Miss Matcher,” she said.

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Miss Matcher bowed. She was neither in her first youth, nor yet beautiful. She had red hair and a freckled face and a snub nose, but her smile was pleasant and distinctly encouraging.

Mainwaring sat down immediately with an air of devotion which completely took in both the girls. He told them some few little incidents of the march; how delighted he was to find himself free of the shadow of Danford, and how glad to be in the delightful atmosphere of Blankhampton.

"There was good hunting at Danford," he observed. "Yes, there was hunting, very decent hunting—unlike this, you know, but still passable; otherwise, excepting that it was fairly near London, so that one could go up for the day and come down in the early morning if necessary, the place had positively not one thing to recommend it. Vile people, horrible people; hideous country; dirty, sordid streets, and the worst barracks I was ever in in my life. 'Pon my word, it's hard to understand why such a place should have been pitched on for a cavalry station; or, having been pitched on, why it should have been done so thoroughly on the cheap. Now, here everything is different. How lucky for your sister, Miss Joan, that she is going to begin her army experience in a place like Blankhampton rather than in such a God-forsaken hole as Danford!"

"Do you know, I think Maudie would almost rather have started in a strange place?" said Joan.

"Really? Ah, she may think so; but if that strange

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place was Danford, it puts it distinctly outside the pale. I never hated a place so much in my life."

"Perhaps you'll hate Blankhampton before you're away from it."

"I don't think so," said Mainwaring, with perfect seriousness. "Excellent hunting, good shooting, good society, good country, beautiful town, lovely girls——"

"What, in Blankhampton?" cried Miss Matcher.

"I thought," said he, looking her straight in the face, "when I was here for Billy's wedding that I had never seen a town with so many pretty girls in it in my life before."

A sudden spasm shot through Joan's heart, that faithful heart which had given itself wholly and for ever, that heart which had been hitherto so hard, so unapproachable. Was he going to class her in a lump with all the rest of the Blankhampton girls? Had he come determined just to have a good time? Would he say the same things to them——?

"Yes, I must go. You see, my mother's on the move," said Miss Matcher, rising to her feet.

Joan got up, and so of course did Mainwaring, shook hands, thanked the parting guest when she begged him to call, and he promptly sat down again as soon as she had moved a step away.

Joan looked round irresolute, but by a deft movement he gave her skirt an imperative twitch, which conveyed quite as plainly as words would have done that he expected her to sit down again at once. "You are not

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thinking of going away, surely, talking to some senseless nobody, when I have been eating my very heart out and making conversation with that frightful young woman?" he murmured in a rapid undertone.

"Were you making conversation?" said Joan.

Mainwaring, turning, looked at her with a whole world of expression in his eyes. "Did I take you in?" he asked, in a tone of much amusement. "Did I really take you in? Gad! what a clever chap I must be! Why, little girl, I thought the young lady with the red head—most appropriately named Matcher, by the bye—would hear my heart going thump, thump, thump. Can't you hear it yourself?"

CHAPTER VII

A BREAK IN THE CHAIN

IT is not very likely that, had the course of events run in an ordinary manner, the friendship between Mainwaring and little Joan could have remained unnoticed by a family as quick-witted and keen of vision as the Delameres up the river.

November and December went quietly by. In January Mainwaring took his leave, and, as he explained to Joan, it was absolutely necessary that he should go away for part of it.

"I don't want to go," he declared. "I'd very much rather stop here; but it would look very suspicious if I did, because I've never stayed with a regiment for leave in my life, and my people would be down on me for a dead certainty. And altogether it's very much better that I should go away, for a part of it at all events."

"Yes, yes," said Joan; "it would be preposterous—your staying here."

"It wouldn't be preposterous from our point of view, but it would from the point of view of all the outsiders. Oh, little girl, little girl, how I wish we could go away on leave together, you and I, and risk everything!"

For a moment Joan did not speak, could not speak. Her heart was beating to suffocation, a great lump had

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risen up in her throat, the pain of which was almost intolerable. "What are the risks?" she asked at last.

"The risks, my dear child, the risks? Ah, it's not so much the risks as it is impossible, out of the question. I've got half a dozen invitations to big country houses. I can't take them—I can't afford it."

"Why not?"

"So expensive. I should have to take horses with me, and my man; and the tips are enormous. You don't realize how hideously poor I am."

"I think I do, Ozzie," she said, after another pause. "I can't think why you stop in the service. There's nothing to be gained from it. Why don't you get out of it, and go into something where you might make some money?"

For a moment he seemed to stiffen all over. Then he relaxed again and began to smooth her hand up and down. "I can't do that, little girl. You see, it's my career. We've always been in the army or the sister service. Even when you are poor there are compensations."

"Are there?"

"Yes. One has one's position, and one's able to live like one's position, so to speak. I like the work, I like the life. I couldn't give it up."

"I suppose not. It seems to me," she said, wistfully, "that if I had the carving of a boy's career I would do everything I could to set him against the army. It's never made worth the while of the men who go into it, as other professions are."

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"What other professions?"

"If you are a doctor——"

"Ah, yes, Harley Street is your goal, and perhaps Brook Street is your Mecca. If you are at the Bar, you work for ten, twelve, fifteen years for a shoeblack's wages, just on the mere chance of getting there some day. If you go into the other walk of the law, you spend your life in a den, surrounded by musty papers, puzzling out devious ways and uninteresting niceties. No, give me the army. They say every private carries a field marshal's baton in his knapsack."

"But you have never been a private, Ozzie."

"No; and I daresay I shall never be a field marshal. But if I hang on I shall have command of the Black Horse in my turn, or of some other regiment equally good. Of course, I would give up a couple of years' seniority to get command of my own regiment."

"And when you have got it?"

"When I have got it? After that—the deluge."

"Well, I may be wrong,—I daresay I don't understand you, Ozzie,—but it seems to me a poor thing for a man to spend his life in courting the deluge."

"No, no, no, no, little girl. It's only the deluge as far as the Black Horse is concerned. There are other things to be had. But as to the question of this leave, I must go home for a bit. You quite understand that, don't you?"

"Oh, quite."

"You don't think for a moment that I wouldn't rather stay here?"

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“Not for a moment.”

Even then Mainwaring did not go away until some days after his leave had begun; but at last, possibly because of strong letters from home, he went up to Riverside and took adieu of little Joan.

“You’ll—that is to say, you are quite sure that you understand? — you’ll” — he began — “you’ll not let any other fellow come about you, and——?”

“Oh, Ozzie, do you think so little of me as that?”

“Little! God knows I think nothing little of you, except your absolute inches,” he said, earnestly. “The fact is, the real truth is, I don’t want to go. I’d rather stay where I am.”

“Well, you’ve got to go. It’s no use spinning it out. You have to go; there’ll be a row if you don’t. After all, Ozzie, the sooner you go the sooner you’ll get it over and come back again. You had better come into the drawing-room and see mother,” she said.

“No, no; we are very well where we are. Don’t drive me into the drawing-room just now. Let’s stay here till somebody comes and turns us out.”

They were then in the girls’ little sitting-room, a pleasant, chintz-draped room, which had been the scene of so many innocent flirtations and of so much girlish joy and merriment.

“Don’t go,” he said, drawing her gently down on to the wide old couch which stood near the fire; “it will be time enough when we are chivied out. I shan’t see you again for a month, or even more. It isn’t as if your

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mother were a Gorgon who would worry your life out if you looked at a man. She's not like most mothers; she's got some feeling for a man."

"Sometimes I think that mother has too much," said Joan. "So many boys of her own, you know, she's lenient to all the other boys that come about the place. It would, perhaps, be better for us, Ozzie, if my people were a bit more strict and a little sharper in looking after us."

But he would have none of that, and he made her sit beside him before the roaring fire, and for nearly an hour they talked of the days which would come in the far-off by and by—at least, he talked, and she did not contradict.

"Little girl," he said at length, suddenly, "you are awfully down to-night."

"Yes, I am down."

"Because I'm going away?"

"Well, of course I don't like your going away, Ozzie,—you know that,—but it isn't altogether for that. I've got a dreadful feeling upon me that nothing will ever be the same again."

"Not as regards me?"

"Not especially as regards you. I have a dreadful feeling of—of—— Oh, no, it isn't because you are going away for a few weeks, not at all; it's a different kind of feeling. However," she said, drawing a long breath, "don't think about it, or talk about it. I daresay it will pass by and by. It's been a gloomy day; we've all been more or less in the dumps, every one of us. But, look here, Ozzie, you positively must come into the drawing-

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room now unless you want to have my people just knowing everything."

"Dear little girl," said he, "I want them to know everything. No man ever wanted publicity as badly or as fervently as I do. It's just a question of filthy lucre, of l.s.d., or sheer want of means. Nothing else would keep me mum, as I have been ever since I've known you. Don't go yet!"

"Yes, yes," said she, firmly, "it's better we should go."

"I know there are people in the drawing-room. I can hear them talking."

"And mother knows that I'm not out, that I wasn't going out this afternoon."

"Very well," said he. "Then this is to be our last good-bye, our real good-bye. Little girl, don't say it will never be the same again. Perhaps it won't be, but—*if it is better?*"

She brightened up at once. "If it is better, Ozzie, then we shall both be very happy, shan't we?"

"Then you'll remember there is to be nobody else?" he said.

"Take care there is nobody else on your side," she retorted.

"My side!" he exclaimed with scorn. "Why, I've got little or no choice in the matter. I never knew another woman that I've known on the banks of Isis."

She whisked him away into the drawing-room then, telling her mother that he had come to say good-bye before he went on long leave.

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“Oh, are you going on leave? Then we shan’t see you for two months,” said Mrs. Delamere, rather blankly.

“Not so long as that, Mrs. Delamere. I’m afraid I’ve already put in a few days of my leave.”

“Well,” said the good lady, hospitably, “we shall miss you, all of us, everyone of us. Where are you going? Sit down there. Tell me all about it. What are you going to do? Who are you going to see? How are you going to amuse yourself? When will you come back again?”

And Mainwaring sat down and told her, very judiciously, everything that was fitting for her to know: that he was going home to see his mother; that he had had a good many invitations, but they cost such a lot of money, entailed so much expense, that he did not intend to accept them; that he thought he should be back in a month’s time, and he hoped that nobody would have supplanted him with all the rest of the family at Riverside during his absence.

“My dear Mr. Mainwaring,” said Mrs. Delamere, in her kindest voice, recognizing, mother of sons as she was, by the hopeless, almost bitter ring in his voice as he spoke of money, pretty well how he was situated, “my dear Mr. Mainwaring, when you come back again, you’ll find your place quite ready for you. I never like,” she went on, kindly, “I never like to answer for very young people, for young people make all sorts of promises, take all kinds of vows, and they mean them, poor dears,—oh, yes, they mean them,—and then something comes to change every-

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thing, and the promises go to the wall. But with the old people there's seldom or never any change. So I won't answer for the others, Mr. Mainwaring; but for myself, you'll find me here when you come back again."

Poor Mrs. Delamere! She meant every word that she said,—every word,—and yet, a month later, when Mainwaring came back to his regiment, there was no Mrs. Delamere to bid him welcome to Riverside. No, there was a sad, hushed house, and one room which was set apart for the time being, a sacred corner which would never be quite the same as an ordinary room to the Delamere family. For Mrs. Delamere, faithful wife, fond mother, true friend, and kindly, jovial companion, was gone, and her place would know her no more for ever.

It was not until the day following his return that Mainwaring heard a single word of what had happened; not, indeed, until Billy Blake, looking very solemn, came up to barracks in time for officers' call the following morning.

"Hullo, Billy!" Mainwaring exclaimed. "How are you, old chap? How is everybody? You look very solemn."

"Ozzie," said Billy Blake, his eyes opening rather more widely than usual, "haven't you heard the news?"

"News? No, old chap. What news?"

"My wife's mother died a week ago."

"Good God! you don't say so! How? when? where?"

"Oh, she died of apoplexy—ill seven or eight hours. They're all heart-broken."

"Good God! And well they may be. I'll go there the

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moment I'm free. I never heard a word. They must have thought me a heartless brute. I never heard a breath of it. Why didn't they let me know?"

"Well, my dear chap, I don't suppose it ever occurred to any of them to let you know."

"No, I suppose not. It's horrible. I'll send my fellow down there at once."

And then there flashed upon him a remembrance of Joan's last words—"I feel as if we should never be the same again."

CHAPTER VIII

A BLACK TIME

AND Joan's prediction was right, for the household at Riverside never was the same after its mistress was taken out of it. The moment that Mainwaring walked into the house that afternoon he realized the change. It was as if all the warmth and light had been taken away.

He was shown into the young ladies' sitting-room, chiefly because not one of the family had entered the drawing-room since the morning that they had assembled there to wait until their mother was carried out of the house. It was tenantless, and he waited some minutes before anyone came to him. Then Norah Delamere came quietly in. She was dressed in deepest mourning, and she was pale, though perfectly self-possessed.

"It was kind of you to send a message down this morning," she said,

"Oh, Miss Norah, I—I—never was so horrified in my life. I hadn't heard a word until Billy told me when I met him in the orderly-room this morning. It's absolutely horrible!"

"You feel it so?" she said. "Then you can think what it is for us. We are quite stunned. Some people whose mother was so much to them might make a noisy fuss. We wish we could—we're just stunned."

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He pushed a chair up to the fire for her, and she sat down, resting her hands idly in her lap and looking at nothing. "It was so sudden," she went on, "so hideously, horribly sudden. My father had left her in perfect health to all outward appearance; when he came back less than three hours after, she did not know him. She did not know any of us after the first few minutes. One of my brothers doesn't know yet."

"Which one is that?"

"Eric. He's making a railway in Australia. We've had an answer from his office, from his people, you know."

"And your sisters?" said he, meaning Joan.

"My sisters? Yes, we are all just the same. It's so queer without mother. She never went away, you know, only when we all went to the sea in the summer. Sometimes she and father went to Paris or to London for a few days, but it was very rare, because he couldn't get away. He holds so many offices. He's going to give them all up."

"Is he, really? That seems a pity."

"Yes; but he seems to have got quite old these last few days. He says his head won't think of all the things. Have you seen Maudie?"

"No, no. I came straight here the moment I was free."

"That was very sweet of you. I wish I could say something else. I seem to have nothing to say. We are all like that. People keep coming—it's awfully kind of them—but we haven't anything to say."

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“It’s much better that you should see people, Miss Norah. If you shut yourself up, the effect may be very, very bad, both upon you and your father, and especially on your father. It’s much better for you to see people and talk about it, and—and—cry if you can.”

“We haven’t cried, any of us. I suppose we oughtn’t to; at all events we don’t.” She turned around as the door opened. “What is it, William?” she asked.

“Miss Norah, Mrs. and Miss d’Egville are here. I showed them into the library, Miss Norah. I thought you would prefer to see visitors—er——”

“Yes, William, I’ll come. William has been so good,” she said to Mainwaring as the door closed softly behind the servant. “Of course, he’s been with us a long time—years and years and years. But still, he’s so thoughtful. So sensible of him to show those people into the library. You won’t mind staying here until one of the others comes down, will you? We don’t want to have anything like a gathering of people.”

“No, no, of course not. Please don’t think about me, Miss Norah. I’ll stay here quite comfortably until one of the others comes down.”

He was not, however, more than a few minutes alone, for Joan came in,—a Joan whom he did not know, very pale, very quiet, evidently in the same frozen, stunned state as her sister had said they all were. He had never seen her in black before, and now her deep mourning struck him as the most terrible garb he had ever imagined.

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"It was kind of you to send down, Ozzie," she said, giving him her hand. "I knew, of course, that you hadn't heard. You see, I was right—it will never be the same again."

"Your poor mother," said he.

"Is it poor mother? I don't know. Of course, if she had had her way, she would have stayed where we are. Perhaps it's better for her, but it's horrible for us."

"And I hear your father—your sister tells me your father is so awfully broke."

"Father? Yes, yes, he is broke. You see, they were everything to each other."

Her calmness struck him as being absolutely unnatural. Norah had been willing, even eager, to discuss the situation; Joan was nothing of the kind.

"My poor little girl," he said at last.

The words were wrung from him in the depth of his emotion and pity. She turned and looked at him. "Yes, we are very sad, all of us. As for me, I can never tell mother now anything about you. It never struck me that I wasn't doing quite the right thing in not telling her everything as soon as I knew it."

"But what was there to tell, little girl?"

"Only the one great thing—that we love each other."

Mainwaring put out his two firm warm hands and took her cold nerveless ones into his grasp. "Come and sit down here," he said. "It's so uncomfortable standing about. I know exactly what you are thinking—that you ought to have told her, that you kept something back,

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and you don't feel quite straight about it. I don't think you need worry yourself. She knew."

"You think so?"

"I don't think about it; I'm certain of it."

"But you didn't say anything to her about it."

"No, I didn't say anything for the same reason that I didn't go to your father and ask for you as soon as you and I had made up our minds. I didn't tell her in so many words, because there was nothing to tell except the one thing. She wasn't a fool, that mother of yours; she was a woman with more than the usual amount of common-sense and tact and discernment. Of course she knew. Did she think I came here day after day to admire the view up the river?"

"Yes, but it might have been one of the others. There was nothing definite."

"Oh, nonsense! If you could ask her now, she would tell you that she knows all about it. Get it out of your head that you deceived her, little girl; there was no deception—nothing of the kind. What passed between us concerned us and nobody else. If we wanted to take an irrevocable step like marriage, then it concerns your father and mother, your brothers and sisters, your relations and friends, just as it does mine; but while we are as we are, it is our business, and concerns only our hearts. I wouldn't think about it at all."

"I have been thinking about it all the time," said Joan.

"Yes, yes, that's natural enough. But it's no good going on thinking about it, little girl, is it?" He

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gave her no time to answer, but went on, having indeed the definite object in view of doing or saying anything which would tend to break down the terrible frozen state in which her grief had imprisoned her. "You are glad to see me again?" he asked, trying to draw her a little nearer to him.

"Yes, I'm always glad to see you; you know that," she said, putting up a hand, however, and pushing him gently back into his original place; "and I feel as if I oughtn't to be."

"You'll get over that feeling," he said. "It's only a feeling."

"I'm not so sure of it."

"You'll be quite sure of it in a little time, dearest, when you have had the chance of thinking it quietly out, without the bias of this dreadful loss. Come, you mustn't let yourself get morbid. It's very hard upon your girls, but it can be nothing to any of you that it is to your father; and for his sake you ought to make an effort, you ought to try and get out of this ghastly calm. Come, have you nothing to ask me? Don't you want to know what I've been doing, where I've been, whom I've seen, how the world is using me? Aren't you even going to say really that you are glad to see me again? Aren't you going to give me a cup of tea? I haven't had a real cup of tea since the last time I was here."

You never can tell in these matters which rod it is that touches the rock of grief. Whether it was the remembrance that her lost mother had been there on the occa-

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sion of his last visit, whether it was that her mother had made tea for him then, whether some inflection of his voice touched some tender chord in her heart, would be hard and impossible to say with certainty, but true it is that long before William had brought the tea-tray, the tears were running down Joan's pale cheeks, and she was already one step on the road to consolation.

And after that it became Oswald Mainwaring's habit to turn into the gates of Riverside as regularly as he turned into the gates of the cavalry barracks. Not a day went by but he was, at some time or other, a visitor to Riverside, excepting of course those days when he was kept confined to barracks as orderly officer for the day. No one questioned his coming or going. Mr. Delamere he seldom saw, for he was, as he had been before, engrossed in the duties of an enormous practice, having been persuaded, against his original desire, to keep his offices. Therein his friends were certainly wise, for had he given up the major part of his work, he would certainly have felt his loss much more bitterly even than he did; but he was seldom at home before dinner-time, and had absolutely no knowledge, and indeed very little thought, for who came and went to the house during his working hours. To the girls, one and all, it seemed a perfectly natural thing that Mainwaring should be in and out as he had been in their mother's day. He was accustomed to speak of himself invariably as a poor man who had to forego all the better part of life. "Joan's pal," they called him, and somehow they all

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came to call him "Ozzie," perhaps because Billy Blake did.

Then there came another break in the household, for Eric Delamere wrote home from Australia begging Norah or Joan to come out and pay him a visit of a few months. "I can't get home for at least a couple of years," he wrote, "if then. I'm awfully knocked over by this blow, and never felt so homesick in my life. By all accounts North hasn't pulled up as she might have done. The climate here is perfect, and the change would do her good. I have a most comfortable house, and would see to it that she has everything that she could desire. The benefit to me would be enormous. Do, please, think it out and arrange it among you."

There was never any question as to which of the girls should go, any more than there was that one of them should, and just three months after her mother's death, Norah Delamere left Riverside, and Joan became the eldest sister at home. This made Joan the mistress of everything. She was a good and earnest housewife, never forgetting her father's interests, never forgetting his comforts, always remembering that she must fill her mother's place as far as was possible.

At the half-quarter Violet went back to school in London, and Agnes, who was not very strong, went south on a series of visits; so Joan was left alone at Riverside with her father and Willy, who had just come of age, and who was working hard for an examination. Probably no one connected with the Delameres, except-

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ing William, knew how regular Mainwaring's visits to Riverside were, and whatever William may have thought, it was not his place to speak.

And so the days went on, and those two who had no prospects and no real hope of the future, went hand in hand further along the inextricable road which we call Love.

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER IX

THE Delameres did not visit anybody during the first year after Mrs. Delamere's death. If the family had continued in an unbroken circle, it is probable that their friends would have, after a few months, persuaded them more or less out of the atmosphere of deep mourning by which they had surrounded themselves; but Maudie was a little way further up the river at the Cottage, and although she received many callers, she was very soon occupied with a baby, and was entirely disinclined for visiting of any kind. Then Norah had gone to Australia; Agnes went abroad with some friends, and was likely to spend the winter in Italy; Violet was still at school; and little Joan definitely vetoed any idea of taking the smallest part in society. So it came to pass that instead of Riverside being, as it had used to be, a meeting-place for all sorts and conditions of Blankhampton folk, it was almost deserted by those who had gone there so much in former years.

"It is astonishing," said one Blankhampton lady to another, "how Mrs. Delamere's death seems to have overshadowed that family. She was a very nice woman, I always liked her immensely, but she never struck me as being such an electric person that her loss should make the whole family break up, as it were."

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"It struck me the other day," replied her friend, "that Robert Delamere has grown quite into an old man."

"Oh, yes, she was everything to him, poor soul! And you know she was fifteen years younger than he was."

"You don't say so! I had no idea of it."

"Yes, yes; Robert Delamere never looked his age until after he lost his wife."

"I did hear," said the other lady, "that there was a chance of another wedding at Riverside."

"Did you? You mean little Joan?"

"Yes."

"That affair does hang fire. I hear he's there, in and out, like a dog in a fair. I wonder why they don't make a match of it?"

"Why, I suppose the usual thing—no money. I know my own girl said to me the other day, when I suggested that a certain very eligible offer she had when she was staying with my sister might be rather a good thing: 'Yes, mother darling, I know he's rich, but he has a wandering eye. I couldn't marry a man with a wandering eye!' Somehow, there's always something. These fascinating men never have two sixpences to rub together; and those who have whole bank-notes to rustle in a girl's face have a wandering eye or its equivalent."

So the lovely summer slipped by, and autumn took its place. It was what one might call an out-door autumn, clear and mellow, like the evening of a beau-

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tiful life. It is hard to describe little Joan's feelings at this particular epoch of her life. You have heard, my reader, of the man who sent for his doctor and said: "I know that I am very ill. What is the matter with me? Tell me the plain truth. Keep nothing back." "The plain truth," replied the doctor, "is that you are suffering from cancer." "Is it curable?" the man asked. "No." "How long shall I live?" A pitiful look came into the doctor's eyes. "At the outside you will live two years," he said. "Very well," replied the patient, "then I'll have roast pheasant and champagne for dinner every night of my life!"

When you think of it, there is a great deal of everyday philosophy underlying that little story. Joan had grown into a philosopher. She was enjoying to-day what it was most unlikely she would be able to enjoy on the morrow. She never looked back; she never allowed herself to look forward; to-day was everything—to-day was Oswald Mainwaring.

She never put it into words; neither did he. As soon as his duty for the day was over, he got out of what he called his "paint" into a tweed suit, and arrived half an hour or so later at Riverside. In the winter he had not hunted; in the spring he neither shot while they were shooting or fished when the fishing began; polo went to the wall; cricket and foot-ball he voted a bore; golf he declared was a game for old gentlemen; society, such as the old city afforded, he eschewed altogether. Outside of the Delameres' house he sought for nothing,

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and accepted no invitations excepting an occasional dinner which he could hardly get off. If Oswald Mainwaring had been a free man, that is to say, if he had not been so choked with debt, if he had had even a modest income that was sure and certain, it is equally sure and certain that little Joan would have become his wife long before the time of which I am writing. In that case I should not have had the same story to tell. As it was, he was living, very much as she was living, in the present, ignoring the past, and resolutely keeping his thought in the future.

The regiment was bound for India at the end of the year. Hunters had all been sold off; indeed, there was scarcely a man in the regiment who had more than his two chargers. The team for the regimental coach had been sold also, and the coach itself had gone to London to be thoroughly overhauled and done up previous to their embarkation for India.

The leave season that year began very early, as the Black Horse were not included in the manœuvres, and every man in the regiment was pressing for an extra long leave to "see and confer with friends at home and abroad prior to embarking for India." It seemed both to Mainwaring and Joan as if he was on duty as orderly officer for the day almost once a week; but it was not really so. In truth his heart was with her at Riverside, and all else in the world was stale compared with the joy of being with and near her.

I feel that this is a very unsatisfactory description of

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the progress of true love. Well, you know it never did run smooth. So far as those two were concerned the course of love ran smoothly enough; he loved her, and she loved him. It was not a question of love for a year, a week, a day—not a bit of it; it was a question of a man and woman being affinities, twin halves of one soul; and the element of roughness came in the simple but irresistible matter of ways and means. Oh, how hard it is when people, who would be perfectly happy if only their circumstances were easy, are fated to have this particular crumpled rose-leaf. Sometimes I hear people say: "Yes, if you were rich you might have a cancer." Good heavens! Is cancer a disease reserved only for the wealthy? Is it only those who are blessed with this world's goods who know the pangs of disease, the pains of suffering, the misery of death by slow torture? Are those who are poor, those who know not which way to turn for the next meal, exempt from the illnesses to which flesh is heir? If it is so, I have never known those people. And yet it does seem when love comes to be the question of the hour, as if money is most often given to those to whom love is as a sealed book. The man who buys himself a wife in the open market with almost as little shame as a planter buys himself a slave, knows nothing of love as it may be, of love as it is where it is freely given. And yet sometimes love is a gift which would be better withheld; love is sometimes a pearl beyond price, useless to the recipient because there is no chance of giving it a suitable setting.

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Are things quite equal in this world? I don't know. It didn't seem so in the Delamere family. Maudie, for instance, had wedded the man of her heart. Hers had been one of those rare marriages in which no drawback was apparent; and yet her own sister, though free, was irrevocably pledged in her soul to a man who would probably never be able to put a roof over her head. Oh, no, things are not equal in any relation of life.

Well, it happened one day, when the last leaves were falling from the trees on to the River Walk, that in talking over the cup of tea which Joan and Mainwaring were taking together in the girls' sitting-room, she happened to speak of the following year:

"We are not going to do it this year. I think probably we shall next."

Mainwaring, who was just holding his tea-cup to his lips, put it down in the saucer with what was almost a bang. "Little girl," he said, "has it ever struck you that next year I shan't be here?"

"I never thought about it," said Joan.

"But it's true, all the same. You'll be here by yourself, or if not by yourself, I suppose some other fellow will be here in my place. I shall be grilling on India's coral strand, cursing at life, fate, everything, and wondering what I was brought into the world for."

"Why talk about it?" said Joan. She had grown white to her very lips, but she was calm and steady. "Why talk about it?"

"I never let myself think as long as I am awake.

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You said to me the other day that you thought I was looking very seedy, that you believed I didn't get out enough in the open air. Do you know why I am looking so seedy?"

"No."

"Because I haven't slept for weeks. I go to bed tired out—I don't go to bed till I *am* tired out—I get into my cot dead-beat, utterly done; sleep for an hour like a log, and then I wake. I lie the rest of the night thinking, worrying, wondering how I am going to get through, wondering what I shall be like when the wrench is over and I am gone, and it will be years before I shall see you again."

"Will it be years?" said Joan.

"What else can it be? You don't realize what a mucker I went in the years before I knew you. Oh, forgive me for using such a term; it's the only one that conveys what a fool I've been. I owe thousands and thousands of pounds, Joan. I—I couldn't keep you like a workman can keep his bride. I never ought to have spoken to you. I—I've been a brute. I ought to set you free, to say: 'Look here, when I go away from this you are as free as air, to do as you like.' There's nothing to look for, nothing to hope for, nothing to be gained by waiting. I am a fraud, Joan. I have no right to be in a cavalry regiment, let alone be such a fool as to want to cut a dash among my fellows. I wasn't brought up right. I was brought up in an atmosphere of sham and pretence. They'd have done better if they

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had put me into a shop or an office. I should never have known you; but I thank God that I did. But you can't say the same. I'm nothing but a blight on you. I'm afraid I've shut the sunshine out of your life. I only hope—and it's hoping against hope—that when it is all over, you'll find you don't care as much as I have tried, God help me! to make you care."

CHAPTER X

CRUEL TO BE KIND

THE effect of Oswald Mainwaring's words to Joan were to make her heart grow cold within her. It seemed to her that she had already tasted of the bitterness of death. And yet she made no great sign of what she felt. An onlooker might well have believed that she did not care very much, for she was to all outward appearances perfectly calm and collected.

"It does seem rather as if we ought to have thought of all this before," she said, very quietly. "However, the mischief is done, and it cannot be undone. I don't know if, for my own part, I wouldn't rather have things as they are. After all, we have loved each other——"

"We *do* love each other," he broke in.

"Yes, yes," and a little smile crept about her mouth, "yes, we do love each other. I—I hardly know how I am going to say what I want to—what I mean to say. When you go away with the regiment——"

"I am not going away with the regiment," he interrupted. "I begin my leave next month. I go to see my mother in Florence; I join the ship at Malta, or at Port Said—probably at Port Said."

"Well, when you go away next month, by all that's sensible and just we must come to an end of the episode."

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“Joan!” he cried.

“It’s no use saying Joan in that tone. There’s nothing else to be done that I can see. I shall have some day a few thousand pounds—five or six, even seven. I—oh, you must forgive me for speaking quite plainly. I quite understand what you mean when you say that we ought to be free. Well, we will be free. You shall go away from Blankhampton, and then you can look for your heiress at your leisure.”

“I never said that.”

“No, you never said it. It’s the natural inference.”

“I have never told you that you could go and sell yourself to the highest bidder.”

“No, there is not quite the same necessity. I shall always have enough to live on. There are a great many of us; there’ll always be somebody that I can make my home with. If I didn’t choose to marry, and I was the last that didn’t marry, I should have plenty of brothers and sisters to share my time out with. I shall never know the actual pinch of poverty. With you, it is different; it is your only way out. It is a chance; about the only chance you’ve got as far as I can judge by what you have told me about yourself.”

“And you’ll promise me——”

“No, I’ll make no promises, and I’ll ask none. We are both to be free as air to do what we judge best under our own particular circumstances—you to look for your heiress; I to live on in my present life unless something should happen to change it.”

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"What kind of a something?"

"Well, it might be—a husband. No, don't look like that. I'm not of an unfaithful nature. I haven't, just at this moment, any intention of marrying even a millionaire. The idea would have no attraction for me."

"You'll write to me?"

"No, I don't think I'll write to you. It would be like a person condemned to be hanged asking for a month's respite. He'd be hanged a thousand times during that month. I'd rather draw the curtain down tight. Believe me, it will hurt less than drawing it down a little way, and letting it come down with a run at the end. Oh, I know what you think. You think that I have no soul, that I have no heart, that I haven't any pity, or any romance, or even much love. Well, all the better if you do think so. It will make it easier for you. It's no use mincing matters. We've an ugly fence before us, you and I, and the cooler we are when we negotiate it the better landing we shall make on the other side."

"I think you are cruel, Joan."

"Do you think I am? I am cruel only to be kind. If you have got an ugly fence that you must take, and it is a leap in the dark, well, take it with a good heart and a steady nerve. If you land in the ditch with a broken back and your horse killed under you, well, you have done your best. The end will be quick and comparatively painless. If you land high and dry on the other bank, you have got a chance of seeing the end of the run and being in at the death; and if you are going just to

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get a ducking and to spoil your habit and your hat and your day's run, there is a merciful hot bath a little further on that will leave you not much the worse for wear. Oh, don't talk to me about being cruel to each other. It won't make any difference to the end, and we've nearly got up to the fence."

"And you won't write to me?"

"I don't think I'll write to you. I have never written to you—a little note, three lines scrawled on a card; I don't call that writing. I have never been in the habit of either sending or receiving letters from you, and I don't want to begin it."

"And you think under some circumstances you may marry?"

"I may. But if I do, you will know that I have put the past right out of my mind. Don't write to me or communicate with me. If you should one of these days see my marriage in the paper, it won't be there unless I have entirely forgotten to-day. As for you, I hope your heiress will be nice, kind, even pretty. Mind you are good to her. It will not be her fault that she does not exist in my body; she is not responsible for the fact that all these many months you have been wishing I were she. Don't pay her out for having the money that I lack."

"You talk as if she was a veritable person, as if she was a foregone conclusion. You—you—break my heart, Joan."

"Do I? I don't mean to do that. We have come to

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a point of plain speaking. It's no use pretending the fence isn't a big one and an ugly one and a hard one; one we know nothing about. We are hunting over new ground with a strange pack. We don't know the ways of anyone or anything; it's all *terra incognita* to us, and we shan't know anything about it until we've gone over that fence. Don't let's go back; don't say that if you had done this or that I should have been different now. If you had done the other, things would have been the same. We have done our best; we have made the most of our time; in a way we have had a good time, you and I. If you had that shop you were talking about, I would have waited for you; I would have begged and prayed you not to leave me; I would have gone against my people; and I'd have looked after the counter when you were going round getting the orders. But you don't keep a shop; you are in the Black Horse, you are over head and ears in debt, you have no chance of paying it. It's no use telling you to go and work. What are you to work at? You have put all your eggs in one basket; that doesn't bring in victory to many people. I wish you would go now. I—I—don't want to go on talking in this strain. But I can't just talk about nothing when my mind is full of what is just ahead. Don't come and see me to-morrow——”

“I shall be on duty.”

“Well, then you can't come. You can come the next day about five. Then don't let's talk about it any more; don't let's die a hundred deaths. Let's be as we have

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been, and as we would be if there wasn't that fence ahead of us."

"You don't mean—you—you—you're not sending me away? You—Joan!" His tone was one of piteous reproach.

"Oh, you are foolish! You are so like a man. I suppose it's natural. I don't want you to remember me all broken up and weak and feeble, crying like a child for the moon it cannot reach; I want you to remember me as always the same Joan,—the Joan who hadn't much money, but still who had plenty of pluck; the Joan who cared for you, loved you too much to want to sacrifice you entirely for herself; the Joan who would have worked and toiled and slaved and died for you if the process would have brought you the advantage of a ha'penny. Come, it is nearly seven o'clock. Don't let the others come and find you here. If they do, and there's any little small talk, I shall certainly go into hysterics, or scream, or do something ridiculous, something that you and I will both be sorry for; something that will give us away."

She was standing on the great skin rug before the fire. She looked very small, but very much in earnest, as she faced him. As for Mainwaring, he was white with pain, frozen with an agony which was almost dull. He had put off the day of reckoning so long, always hoping, praying, yearning for something to happen, a something for which he had no substantial ground of hope. And now it was like a new pain, a new wrench, a new diffi-

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culty; and she would not give him time even to think about it.

He put his hands out and grasped her arms above the elbows, drawing her slowly towards him. "You do love me?" he asked.

"Oh, do you doubt it? Best if you can. Best if you can blot me out, cut me off, tear your heart out by the roots. Till the field afresh for the heiress. She will be very nice. She'll make you a free man; she'll make the way easy, the road clear. I can do none of these things."

"But you can love me."

"Well, we can't live upon love—not in the Black Horse. We can't live upon love in the life that you and I have been used to. It wouldn't last. If we had a shop—but we haven't a shop. We can't open a shop now. Oh, say good-bye for to-night!"

He bent his head down to hers. For one moment she clung to him, then with all her small force she thrust him away. "Not again! We have had the worst of our parting. Go, and God bless you! Good-bye. The day after to-morrow."

She turned and looked into the fire as he moved towards the door. There he stopped and looked back. The little figure in the black gown was quite quiet, the hands folded lightly together, the head a little bent, the serious eyes fixed upon the ruddy heart of the glowing coals in the grate. He stopped irresolute, stretched out a hand, drew it back, made a step towards her, then softly opened the door and as softly closed it behind him. Not

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so softly but that she heard it, heard him cross the hall, knew that he was putting on his coat, heard him take his stick out of the stand, heard the gentle opening and closing of the outer door.

It was all over. Oswald Mainwaring was gone.

CHAPTER XI

GONE AWAY

PERHAPS you may have noticed in love-stories how frequently the heroine gives way to a storm of passionate sobs and tears. I don't know why this should have come to be the accepted, or almost the accepted, fact for conduct under such circumstances. As a rule, people who pass through those moments which leave an indelible mark upon the heart, and even upon the soul, seldom find the relief of tears. Even those whose tears gush forth readily at some tale of pathos and woe, who weep freely at a theatre, or cry copiously over a book, find no such relief when their own circumstances call most urgently for it. If Joan Delamere had been a proper heroine, she would have collapsed as soon as she heard the outer door shut and knew that Mainwaring was gone, and would have wept far into the night, when she would have fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, and so would have awoke to a realization of the bitter truth when the sun was high in the heavens the following morning.

Poor little Joan was not that kind of heroine. For full five minutes she never moved from where she stood. Then she sat down very quietly in a corner of the big couch on which she and Mainwaring had been sitting for the past two hours, and leaning back among the cushions she wondered blankly what she was going to

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do with her life. The thought of tears never came to her; she had no desire for them. She was like a person who had lost her way, like one walking along a pleasant country road who found herself suddenly in a *cul de sac*, with high hedges on either side and a dead blank wall ahead. There was no getting over the dead blank wall. It was a full stop. The hedge on the right hand was dense and prickly; that on the left was less dense, although it seemed to her that it was made of poisonous plants. You can never retrace your steps along the pathway of life. You may turn to the right or to the left, or you can go right ahead—there is no going back.

Well, she could go neither forward nor backward. She had the choice between the right hand and the left. The left meant clinging with might and main to a shadow—oh, to something worse than a shadow! The right meant forcing her way through, regardless of pain and difficulty, to where she might find green meadows and sunshine if she only tried hard enough. Well, the left hand, with its regrets, its desires, its yearnings, its hopes foredoomed to lingering death, its efforts foredoomed to failure, she would put on one side as being unworthy of a proud spirit. Her only way was to turn to the right, and as she sat there, quiet and alone, she planned out all the immediate future.

So by the time her father and Willy came home from the office, she knew exactly what she was going to do and to say. They never noticed that there was any change in her. Men don't—at least, fathers and brothers

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don't. Mr. Delamere shook himself free of his office cares, and spoke in what, for him, was quite a brightened tone. Willy remarked that it was bitterly cold outside, and said he believed they were going to have the hardest winter that had been known for years. They had never dressed for dinner since Mrs. Delamere's death, although it had been a regular custom of the house up to that sad event. During the progress of the meal Joan was very quiet. She talked a little on subjects of utter indifference to herself, but which she thought would interest her father. She did not feel there was any necessity to give way, and it was not until they had gone into the morning-room, and Willy had betaken himself off on some quest of his own, that Mr. Delamere noticed how very pale his daughter was.

"You are not very well, Joan?" he said.

"No, Dad, I am not very well."

"You want a change."

"Yes, I was going to speak to you about it. If you don't mind, I should like to go away for a fortnight or so. Could you get on?"

"Oh, yes, child."

"I could get Maudie to come and stay with Billy and the baby. They would keep you alive."

"Where are you going?"

"I should like to go to Aunt Geraldine. I feel I must have a little change from Blankhampton. You know, I've been here practically without a break ever since Norah went away; and if Maudie were with you——"

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"Oh, if Maudie were with me, I should be all right. It will be a treat to me to have her. And they give up their house at the end of the month, don't they?"

"Yes, she was coming home in any case, you know; she mentioned it yesterday. So I'll go and see Maudie presently. You needn't trouble to stir out. I'll take Fanny with me. And then I could go to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, I should like to go to-morrow, just for a fortnight."

Such things are easily arranged. Before Joan went to her bed that night she had arranged every detail of her intended flight from home.

"If you don't mind, Maudie," she said, when, after her talk with her father, she called on her sister, "I'd rather Billy didn't mention up at the barracks that I'm going away."

"You haven't quarrelled with Ozzie Mainwaring, have you?" asked Maudie, looking at her sharply.

"Oh, no, not quarrelled."

"He's in love with you, Joan."

"Is he? Perhaps. We can't live on honey and air, you know. There wouldn't be much nourishment in it. We can't marry, and sometimes a parting is almost a tragedy."

"I understand." The eldest sister looked pitifully down from her superior height upon Joan. "He oughtn't to have done it, Joan," she said at last.

"Well, perhaps he oughtn't. Perhaps I oughtn't. It's

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no use going into that now, is it? I want a change. I want to get away. He's on duty to-morrow. I want to be gone by the time he is free. You needn't give him my address. I don't want him coming to Aunt Geraldine's after me. It's only prolonging it. When you have got to use the knife, it is just as well to cut deep and get it all over at once. No, don't look at me like that. I'm not a broken-hearted, deserted little person who's going about wearing green and white for the rest of her life. Don't think it for a moment."

"My dear," said Mrs. Blake, "I think I know pretty well how things are with you both. There's no doubt about what Oswald Mainwaring feels. I wish now that we had decided to go to India instead of shirking it by exchanging. It would have been better for you, and better for him."

"No, I don't agree with you. It might have prolonged it a little. What's the good of prolonging it? We can't live on nothing. We can't wait until we are old—at least, I don't think it's fair for a man to do it. And so I want to go away. You understand? I think it's better. And you'll tell Billy? And now I'll go back. I have a heap to do to-night before I go to bed, and I want to catch the two-o'clock train to town to-morrow. You quite understand, Maudie? You'll come with Billy and the baby, and all your goods and chattels, and you'll take care of Dad until I come back again."

"But when you come back?" asked Maudie.

"Well, he's going to Florence to see his mother. She

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lives there. He's going to stay with her a little while, and then get across the Mediterranean and catch the regiment up at Port Said. And now I'm going, Maudie. Good-bye, my dear. You'll come down and see me in the morning, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. There'll be some things I can help you with, I daresay. I'll come as soon as Billy has gone to barracks."

So the sisters parted, and Joan, accompanied by the maid Fanny, went back to Riverside. She was quite cheerful, told Fanny exactly what she wanted her to do, and indeed a good many of her things were packed before she sought her bed that night.

Even then she showed no signs of giving way. She had made up her mind to take a certain course, a definite line, and she allowed nothing that had happened to come in between her and what she was determined to do.

She got into bed rather late, and if she did not sleep, at least she did not weep. And in the early morning she rose and, turning on the gas fire, she put away in an inner drawer of her wardrobe every little trifle that could serve to remind her of Mainwaring: all his letters, carefully tied up in packets,—and by letters I mean little notes written from barracks about the affairs of the moment,—bottles of scent, queer odds and ends that he had given her from time to time; a dozen photographs of himself, a programme of the Black Horse sale of hunters and chargers the previous spring; two or three dance programmes, a couple of stars taken off his uni-

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form, a few withered flowers, and a little gold thimble with "Joan" engraved upon it. A pitiful collection, but then all lovers' gifts are pitiful when the lovers have come face to face with a blank wall.

Joan locked them away with a resolute hand. She was like a being possessed; and yet in all her resolution, running through all her determination of spirit, there was one thread of sheer cowardice—the dread of another parting from Oswald Mainwaring.

It was just twenty-seven hours after Joan left Blankhampton that Oswald Mainwaring came briskly down the road leading from the barracks to the town, and turned in at the accustomed gates. It didn't strike him that anything had happened. The house was just the same. William showed him into the morning-room, all redolent of the presence of the girl he loved. He waited a few minutes, wondered impatiently why she was so long in coming, and then the door opened and Mrs. Blake came into the room.

"Good-morning, Ozzie," she said, quite cheerfully, though to tell the truth her heart was going like a steam-engine from sheer fright. "You know Joan is away?"

"I don't understand," he said, blankly.

"Joan's gone away for a time. She went yesterday. Didn't you know?"

"This is the first I have heard of it."

"Oh, well, she left a letter for you. Let me see—what did I do with it? Ah, here it is. I put it in here to be ready for you when you came." As she spoke, she

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took a letter addressed in Joan's handwriting from an old lacquer box which stood upon the table near to the big couch. "She'll tell you all about it. She had to go. She really wasn't well. Father was quite uneasy about her. Billy and I and Baby have come to stay here for a few weeks—oh, for the rest of our time in Blankhampton, in fact. You'll have some tea?"

"Thanks, yes."

"Such horrid cold weather," Mrs. Billy Blake went on; "and the Cottage is such a cold house. I'm so thankful to be at home again for a little time. Yes, William, I would set it just here. By the bye, I don't want to see any visitors this afternoon, William."

CHAPTER XII

A MIGHTY ITEM

IT was a hideous half-hour which Oswald Mainwaring and Mrs. Billy Blake spent together in the morning-room at Riverside. As soon as Maudie handed Joan's letter to Mainwaring, he, with a fine air of carelessness, put it away in the breast-pocket of his tweed jacket. He was longing to know the meaning of it all, to see what reason Joan had given, to get the worst over, and there he had to sit talking to Mrs. Billy Blake of all people in the world—Mrs. Billy, who didn't interest him the least little bit, excepting so far that she was Joan's sister.

If it was a painful half-hour for him, it was equally so for her, for, although she did not know what was in her sister's letter, she had gathered fairly well two evenings before what was in her sister's heart. She was sorry for him, and, being most happily and advantageously married herself, she was more than sorry for her. She knew by that quick instinct which all women have that Joan's letter was absolutely burning a hole in his pocket; that it was pressing against his heart like a lump of lead; and yet she gave him tea, and made conversation, and then gave him more tea, and cut more cake, and they made believe that there was nothing out of the ordinary on foot. Oh, dear, the games of make-believe that go on in this

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world! The people who care and pretend that they don't care; the patient martyrs who hide their suffering as gallantly as did ever the little Spartan boy who smiled while the fox was gnawing his vitals.

At last he got away out of her presence, feeling as if he had come to the last point of his endurance. He did not go back to barracks; on the contrary, as he turned out of the gates of Riverside he went in the other direction, turning again sharply to the right and taking a narrow lane which led beside the Riverside property from the high road down to the banks of the river. Being in mid-winter, the river walk was entirely deserted. Mainwaring walked sharply along until he came to a seat, and there he sat down and tore open the letter which contained Joan's explanation.

It was a pitiful epistle. "I can't exist through the next fortnight," she wrote, "if I am to see you every day. It would be like taking a condemned man every day, between sentence and execution, that he might look upon the place where he would eventually suffer. So I am going away. You will think me cowardly, perhaps; and yet I feel that you will understand. Remember, I ask nothing of you, look for nothing, scarcely hope for anything. Don't write to me. You can leave me a letter at home, so that I shall find it when I come back. Don't ask them for my address, please, I beg of you. I feel that there is going to be no future for us—*can* be no future. It will always be easier for both of us in after years to feel that we parted without tears, almost without pain.

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That has yet to come. I needn't make any pretence to you of what I wish for you. You must know that just as well as if you were inside my heart. Whatever you do in the future, I shall never reproach you. I shall never think of you excepting with the truest and sincerest affection. To the end of time I shall be your faithful friend,

“JOAN.”

“Faithful!”—“affection!”—“sincere!” He sat like a man turned to stone, wondering in a dull, dim kind of way why this hideous blow should have fallen upon him. After all, she did not care. She could sit down and pen a letter that was almost like a sermon! It hurt him. “Whatever he did, she would never reproach him!” That meant when he had sold himself.

“I'll never sell myself!” he cried out aloud; and he stamped his foot upon the frozen ground, and down in his heart he stamped a vow that, come weal come woe, he would go on to the end as he was.

Of course, he had always said to his people, as to his intimate friends: “I've got to marry money, you know. What's a poor devil to do who hasn't got enough for himself? Look out for a wife that has plenty.” It had seemed to him in years gone by quite a natural thing, a kind of instinct of self-preservation. Coming from Joan—oh, it was sacrilege!

He turned to the letter again. But she had never said it! What she said was, “Whatever you do, I shall never reproach you.” Perhaps she was only trying to make

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him—— No, it couldn't be that. Was she mercenary? Was it that she did not want to bind herself? Oh, it was a dreadful, dreadful thought, but it was not a thought that seemed to fit with Joan in any way.

Then he took the letter out of his pocket and read it again. So he was not to see her—not to write to her; he might write so that she could receive his letter when she came back. Then he fell to admiring her, to thinking what pluck she had, what grit; thinking how delicious and brave she was, how steadfast of heart, how different to other girls, how unselfish. Yes, the most unselfish girl he had ever met in his life, because she showed quite plainly that she cared more for him than for herself.

He might write to her when she came back. Well, he would leave a letter for her, and would tell her in it quite plainly that it was no use her trying to palm him off on some nebulous heiress. Heiresses might be very fine and large, but they were not for him, most indisputably not for him.

At last Mainwaring got up from the seat and turned his steps in the direction of Blankhampton. He went by way of the river, passing along the quaint water-way and up the steps by the bridge which led into St. Thomas's Street. In that principal thoroughfare he met several people he knew, and made several purchases; told everyone that he was going away in a few days, and that he was going out to Italy to see his mother before he went to India. He carefully said nothing of his plan to join the ship at Port Said, and finally he went back to bar-

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racks in quite a virtuous glow of good feeling with himself.

He was poor, his thoughts ran, but he was true towards the girl he loved. He had, in idle moments of the past, regarded the idea of marrying for money as a perfectly natural thing, but when such an action came to be weighed in the balance against even the most abject poverty with the girl of his heart, there was no hesitation, no holding back on his side. If the worse came to the worst, she could come out to him. They could live out there right enough on what he had.

Dear little soul! He quite understood her feeling of wanting to hasten the blow of parting instead of dragging it out in what would be worse than slow torture. Her desperate action in literally running away only served to prove to him how entirely and deeply she loved him. After all, what did anything matter while they loved each other? What difference would it make whether they had one thousand a year or two? Whether they had two rooms or six? Whether they had one servant or ten? Fundamentally, no difference; actually, a mere discomfort not for a single moment to be weighed in the balance against such a mighty item as love. He forgot his many debts, his extravagant tastes, his desire for the best of everything, the position which would need a certain amount of keeping up; he forgot everything excepting Joan herself.

He was still thinking hard over a pipe when his servant came in.

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"Are you going to dine at mess to-night, sir?" he asked.

"Of course," was Mainwaring's reply.

"Getting very late, sir," said the man; "you haven't ten minutes to change in."

"All right," said Mainwaring, putting his pipe down on the little table beside his chair, "I'll change at once. Why didn't you put out my other mess uniform?"

"Guest-night, sir."

"But you have put out my old things."

"No, sir; these are your best," said the man.

"Oh, I must have a new mess uniform before I go away. Remind me when I go to London." And then he remembered with a pang that if he meant to be economical in the future he wouldn't be able to have his various uniforms kept up to the very last state of freshness by having always a new one for special occasions.

It was the beginning. Well, he would have to have a new mess uniform for India. Years would pass before he would have the opportunity of getting any renewals. And he owed his tailor such a devil of a bill; moreover, he wouldn't be able to pay even a farthing on account, either to his tailor or to any other tradesman to whom he owed money. His bills in London were something enormous; his bills even in modest little Blankhampton would tot up to a goodly amount. He hated doing it, but he knew that there was only one way in which he could get out of town, and that was to go round the day before his leave began and tell the various tradespeople to send

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in their bills immediately. Then he would go off to Italy, and Blankhampton and London would know him no more for some years at least.

As he went along the corridor, his thoughts were still occupied in this manner. He stopped under a glaring gaslight and looked down at his mess jacket. This was his best. Yes, it was distinctly off its first bloom; indeed, it was something more than off its first bloom; he might almost call it beginning to get shabby. And it was his best. How was he to go to India without a decent mess uniform, where he would have to be continually dining with governors and other gorgeous persons? Perhaps, though, he wouldn't wear mess dress for such a purpose, and his full-dress tunic had been new within the last three months.

Still, it was no use worrying about it. He would have a few days in London. He would go and order a mess uniform and get it fitted on, and if the people didn't choose to deliver it without the money, that was their look-out; he would be out of reach and need not worry himself.

Yet it was a very curious state of mind in which he found himself that evening, one in which he hung balanced between necessity and desire. As yet necessity was not weighing down the one side of the scales, and desire hung very heavy on the beam. Of course, he couldn't give up Joan. Dear little Joan! That was impossible. It was a contingency not to be thought of for a single instant. And when he was back again in his

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rooms, stretched out comfortably in a long chair, with a whiskey-and-soda beside him, and his trusty pipe in his mouth, he told himself that he had come to a conclusion.

“It’s awful rot what people say,” his thoughts ran as he watched the smoke go curling up towards the ceiling. “How does the old saw run? ‘When poverty walks in at the door, love flies out at the window.’ What rot! Here am I, over head and ears in debt, no prospects, no chance of ever being much better off, and I am more in love with Joan than ever I was before.”

CHAPTER XIII

A VERY LONG GOOD-BYE

IN one of Joan's letters to her sister, Mrs. Billy Blake, was enclosed a slip of paper. On this Joan had written: "Let me know when Oswald Mainwaring has gone away. Then I shall come home." Mrs. Billy discreetly burned the slip of paper, and, faithful to her sister's trust in her, she advised little Joan when Oswald Mainwaring had actually left Blankhampton.

"No, I shan't see you again, Mrs. Billy," he said to her when he went down to Riverside the day before his leave began, "because I'm going to join the regiment at Port Said. I think I told you. I shall hope to see you again later on, when I come back again. I wish you had been coming out with us."

"So do I," said she, heartily. "But Billy wouldn't. Billy never wanted to go to India; and of course it doesn't matter to me where I am."

"I hope you'll like the new regiment as well as the old one. I hope Billy will like it," he added.

"I doubt it. A change of regiment is like a change of wife—it's a big thing to undertake."

"You'll write to me sometimes, Mrs. Billy?" he asked.

"I'll write, Ozzie, with pleasure. Billy is sure to write to you. You are his greatest friend."

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"I hope he will; and you, too. And I hope you'll be glad to see me when I come back again. It may be some years first. I want to do what I can towards paying my debts off. Oh, Mrs. Billy, if only somebody could rise up who would warn youngsters, when they first go into the army, against the hideousness of getting into debt!"

She put her hand out and laid it on his arm. "Cheer up, Ozzie," she said. "You never know your luck. Something may turn up. You may come into a title, or a fortune, or light on your feet somehow. Anyway, cheer up."

"It's awfully hard," said he, "to cheer up when you are leaving everything you most value in the world behind you, and you are leaving it on an uncertain footing. However, it's no use snivelling. I've got myself to thank for the hole I'm in, and myself to blame for it."

"Well," said Mrs. Billy, who, much as she liked her husband's friend, was rather angry with him than otherwise for having entangled her sister's affections, "well, it's a good thing you can't go round blaming somebody else. I always feel that with old-fashioned housewives, who make such a deadly row when one of their servants breaks a piece of china or glass. It's surprising the excuses they find for themselves under like circumstances, and what was a deadly and premeditated offence in the one case becomes the most hideous accident in the other. You got into debt; I suppose you had a good time in the past; I hope it was worth it."

"It wasn't," said he. "It's never worth it when it's gone by."

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"That's as may be," said Mrs. Billy. "I'd like you better myself if you owned up that you never looked back. I hate people who look back on what's done and cannot be undone. Look here," she said; "of course, it's no use our pretending to each other that I don't know what you feel about my sister."

"About Joan?" said he.

"Yes. You are not interested in one of my other sisters, are you?"

"Only as Joan's sisters."

"Exactly. I thought so. It's no use my pretending to you that Joan isn't interested in you. She wouldn't make a clean bolt of it, show a clean pair of heels, as it were, unless she didn't want to have the pain of a big parting. I think she's wise. Have you spoken to Joan?"

"I don't know what you mean by speaking to Joan," he rejoined, half-fiercely.

"Don't you? I'll put it quite plainly, Ozzie. Is Joan engaged to you?"

"No."

"Are you engaged to Joan?"

For a moment he hesitated. "As regards Joan—no; as regards myself—yes."

"I don't understand you. How can one be without the other?"

"Well, I've not—at least, Joan—that is to say, I've had no opportunity of being actually engaged to her. She knows that I love her; she knows if I had a million to-morrow I would lay it at her feet."

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"Yes. Well, that's a problematical kind of compliment. 'I like you very much for yourself,' you say. 'If I were a wealthy man, I would like to make my love for all time; as I am not a wealthy man, I can't.'"

"You are quite wrong," said he. "I never felt like that; anyhow, I can't ask Joan to run away with me. Your father wouldn't consent to a marriage."

"He might."

"He *might*; but I haven't got the cheek to go and ask him to. I'll go out there for a couple of years, and I'll live on nothing, so to speak, and I'll pay off some of my debts at all events."

"Well?"

"And then Joan will only be one-and-twenty."

"Yes. And you'll have no better prospects then than you have now."

"No, I shall have no better prospects,—that is the unfortunate part of it. I have no prospects, Mrs. Billy. I have a profession. It is not a profession that makes money; it wants money. I haven't anything to offer Joan but myself."

"Well, of course you are all right in yourself, Ozzie,—I'm not saying a word against you,—you are a good height, and a good breadth, and you are apparently thoroughly healthy and good-tempered, sound of wind and limb, and all that sort of thing; but, at the same time, you and Joan won't be able to live upon that. You never thought of leaving the army, I suppose?"

"I have thought of it. What could I do? I was trained

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for the army from my earliest youth. I haven't got two ideas in my head outside of the army. If I sent in my papers to-morrow, what should I do? Drift to London, try my hand at business of some kind, get fleeced of every farthing I've got,—and they are few enough, God knows,—and end up by being ten times worse off than I was at the beginning. I knew a chap," he went on, "he was in my regiment, an awfully swagger chap, too; beastly unpopular, but still he had good family and a certain amount of money. He left the service—I never quite knew why, but he left. He went into the wine trade. The last time he dined at mess he tried to do a wine deal with the president. The president, who had always rather liked him, said for the sake of old times he couldn't refuse an old comrade. I don't know whether the fellow made out of it; I know the mess didn't. I shouldn't like to come down to anything of that kind, Mrs. Billy."

"No, that's a very poor sort of business," said Mrs. Billy. "There are hundreds of things to do that are more suitable and more in accordance with a man's position than touting for wine orders."

"Yes," said Mainwaring, gloomily, "I know there are hundreds of things to do; but are there hundreds of things to do which require no training, no money, no influence, nothing but the presence of a man of less than average intelligence in the ways of business?"

"No, I don't think there are," she said.

"It's so easy to talk about there being hundreds of ways of making money," he went on. "In my experience

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I have always found that the most extravagant women have two refuges which mentally they fly to when they get to the end of their tether: the one is, of course, the work-house, and the other is going out to scrub floors for a living. Now, Mrs. Billy, I wonder what sort of good you'd be at scrubbing floors for a living?"

Mrs. Billy Blake laughed. "Well, Ozzie, I daresay I should be quite as good at it as you would be at the work of a stevedore."

"Yes, I daresay you would. And the average stevedore and charwoman would show us the way round and work our heads off in about ten minutes. It's no use, Mrs. Billy. I was brought up for the army and cut out for the army. I am a decent enough soldier, though I shall probably never have the chance of earning any distinction. Still, it is a progressive profession; I've got plenty of brains to get through my examinations and so on, but I haven't got the sort of brains that go to make up a good business man; it's no use pretending I have. I know a chap," he went on, "who set up an old curiosity shop. He knew all about it. He'd walk into a marine store dealer's and pick out some filthy object that anybody would pay money to have carted away, and he'd make a fortune out of it; that is to say, he'd make a profit of three figures. Oh, it requires special training and special brains, special genius, for that kind of thing. No, Mrs. Billy, there's nothing for it, as far as I am concerned, but just going out to India and sticking at the grind until I've got through the bad time."

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"And something may turn up," said Mrs. Billy.

"No," said he, "nothing will turn up, unless it is my toes."

"Well, I'm awfully sorry for you, Ozzie. I meant—well, you know, when I suggested business there are plenty of businesses besides those in London. I suppose you never thought of going in for a land agency?"

"My dear girl, I don't know anything about it," he replied. "I should get everything into an unholy mud-dle inside of a week, and then I should get the sack straight. No, there are too many younger sons properly trained for the work from their infancy, just as I've been trained for the army. The army is my fate, and I must stick to it. I suppose," he added, after a minute's pause, "I suppose you wouldn't give me Joan's address, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't. I promised I wouldn't."

"I should have liked to have seen her again," he said, wistfully.

"Yes, yes, of course you would; but it's better not. You know all this is very hard on little Joan. She is so pretty, and so unlike every other girl, so steadfast and true; you ought to have bitten your tongue out before you ever allowed it to utter one word of what you were feeling in your heart."

"I did try. Somehow I couldn't."

"No, I daresay not; but it's very hard on her."

"It's just as hard on me."

"No, it isn't—no, no, that's not so. You have got

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yourself and your own folly to thank for your present crippled situation; Joan has never done anything that she shouldn't have done. She's always been unselfish; she's always thought more about others than herself. I don't pity you as I pity Joan."

"Oh, Mrs. Billy, don't rub it in," he said. "You can't blame me more than I blame myself, and all the rubbing in in the world won't put the clock back; all the regret in the world won't undo what has been done. I have made my bed; I suppose I must sleep on it. Then, you won't give me Joan's address?"

"No, I can't do that."

"Well, I'll write to her to-night. You'll take care of the letter, perhaps, until she comes back? And for the present, Mrs. Billy, I'm afraid it's a very long good-bye between us."

CHAPTER XIV

THE BURDEN OF LIFE

IN due course of time Oswald Mainwaring left Blankhampton and Mrs. Billy Blake wrote to little Joan that the coast was clear and she could come home when she liked. But Joan showed herself in no hurry to get back to the home nest. On the contrary, she wrote to her sister to the effect that she intended to stay where she was for some time longer, and then she thought she would pay one or two other visits which she might find difficult later on.

“I don’t particularly want to come back while the regiment is still there,” she said. “I’ve got over the awful wrench of it myself, but I know that I shall feel it frightfully when I come back. If there are new men in the cavalry barracks new faces, new married officers, an entirely new military atmosphere, it won’t be quite like coming back to what I left; that is to say, I may feel the blank a bit less. I am writing awfully plainly to you, Maudie; but it’s no use trying to keep any secrets from you. I never did, and I probably never shall. This business has hit me very hard. I shall get over it best if I am left to get over it in my own way. The time since dear mother’s death has been a horrible strain to me on all accounts. In the first place, I have never been used to

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being alone ; and to be alone when one is in deep mourning and great trouble is a very different thing to being alone when you can go out and seek distraction in other people's houses. I have tried hard to make father feel his loss as little as was possible. I think he has been as good as gold. I know that I have not been able to do very much to soften the blow to him. Then, Willy has been hard at work,—always stuck up in his own room with a wet towel round his head, as you may say ; and with all the girls who used to be at home gone, and you married, and no mother—well, life at Riverside has been one huge strain over since the day of her death. I know that you and Billy are content to stay with Dad as long as you are in Blankhampton, and perhaps, as your leave begins when the regiment marches out of Blankhampton, you won't mind staying a few days longer still. This would give me a chance of the change that I have badly wanted for months past ; and so I think I'll go on to the Osbornes from here, and to the Harringtons after I leave the Osbornes. If you and Billy were going to India, I wouldn't propose this ; but it will be such a long time before I get a chance again, probably not until Norah comes back from Australia. If my ideas don't fall in with yours, let me know, dear Maudie, and I'll accommodate myself at once and come home."

In answer to this Mrs. Billy wrote that she and Billy and the baby were perfectly happy at Blankhampton as long as the regiment remained in the cavalry barracks. "After that," she wrote, "we have two months' leave,

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and I am perfectly willing, and so is Billy, to stay here for half of it. Indeed, I think it is most essential that you should have a good change after the long strain you have been under, and your affair with O. M. must have added to it rather than have taken you out of yourself. Dear little Joan," she added, "I am sorry that things haven't gone smoothly. If you are hard hit, my dear, so is he. He mayn't have twopence, but he loves you with all his heart, Joan. I never saw a man, short of breaking down and howling, so crushed and depressed as he was the last afternoon that he was here. I have a letter for you from him, which I promised to keep until your return. Shall I send it to you, or shall I keep it until you come back?"

In reply to this little Joan wrote back that she would be obliged if Maudie would take care of the letter until her return. "He wished me to have it when I came back," she said, "and I don't want to do anything to go against him."

So it was not until the Black Horse were far on their way to India, not until after Oswald Mainwaring had joined the ship at Port Said, and they were, in fact, steaming across the Indian Ocean, that the letter he had written in farewell to his sweetheart reached her hands.

She read it on the evening of her home-coming; read it when she had said good-night to everyone and was locked safely in the sanctuary of her own chamber. Shall I confess? She read it on her knees, with a crushed and bleeding heart, in which love and pride and pain seemed to be fighting hard as to which should have the pre-

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eminence. It was a long letter. It praised and blamed her in one breath; it extolled her stoicism and her courage, placing those virtues at the height that a born soldier would place them; yet it blamed her, and promised and foretold and vowed all manner of incoherent impossible things; and the one thread of divine comfort that came to her was that Mainwaring meant to get through, meant to be faithful, meant to come back to her, meant that she should be his one day.

Oh, the vows that men make when their hearts are full of love! They are so real, they are so sweet to the women who read them. She read the letter again and again, until she knew it by heart, and then she put it away in a quaint little Japanese cupboard, profusely bound with silver, which she had acquired for the purpose during her last visit to London, along with half a dozen photographs of Mainwaring and the few trifles that he had given her from time to time. Then she locked the little shrine and hung the key upon the slender chain about her neck.

“There, that is all over,” she said; “all over.” And then she got into her bed with a great lump in her throat and tears in her eyes.

But she was not wholly sad. There was light ahead; there was a future, although the road between looked dull and dreary. And from that day little Joan took up the burden of life again. It seemed like a half life. No Oswald Mainwaring coming in towards tea-time; no notes or books, or flowers sent down by a soldier-servant; no

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vivid interest in life—not even letters to write or news from India. Yet she never looked back or repented that she had been so firm in closing the door between them. “It wouldn’t be fair to him,” her thoughts ran, “if I had kept up a correspondence or tied him in any way. If he meets his heiress, I—well, there won’t be anything to break off. If he wins through, he will be the better worth waiting for.” And yet she longed for some sign or word from the man she loved; longed passionately, fiercely, with a longing that was almost unbearable, to have just a few lines in the firm, well-loved, and well-remembered handwriting. But yet she was not outwardly sad; she was not outwardly any different to what she had always been.

As the months went by, she began to lighten the deep mourning of her attire; she began to go about a little among her friends and to take part in the festivities which offered themselves. Her father wished it so.

“I understand what you feel. You say you don’t want to go to this dance, Joan,” he said to her one day, when she had definitely declared that nothing should induce her to accept an invitation which had just arrived by post. “It will be a hideous wrench for you going back into gaiety, and for all the rest of us, but you mustn’t forget you have sisters. You are twenty now, Joan, quite an old woman; they are young, with all their girlhood before them. Oh, my dear child, I was only joking when I said that you were quite a woman.”

“So I am, dear,” said Joan, her thoughts flying over

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thousands of miles of space to where he, who had made her disinclined for dances, was living. "So I am, dear. I never was young like Agnes and Violet. Mother always used to call me 'the witch,' if you remember,—the little grave, wise woman. I never was a gay, bouncing flirt like the others. But, of course, if you wish it, I'll go to this dance. I had forgotten all about Agnes and Violet. Of course, Agnes will be home, and she will want to go."

"And she shall go."

"She ought to have a new white dress, don't you think? It's really her coming out."

"Oh, certainly, certainly," said Mr. Delamere. "I can't quite give her a dance."

"Oh, no, dear, don't think of it," said the girl, her voice shaking at the remembrance of the last dance that had been given under that roof; "don't think of it. Agnes wouldn't wish it. She can have plenty of fun, plenty of gaiety without that. Then I'll see after getting her a nice coming-out dress at once, and I suppose I had better arrange with Aunt Eleanor to chaperon us?"

"Yes, I suppose it is necessary just to mention it. She told me the other day she'd do anything I liked in that way, now that Maudie isn't here."

"Then, Maudie wants Agnes to go and stay with them a little while. They've got some steeplechases and other things coming off, and Agnes will be pretty sure of a gay time."

"Let her go," said Robert Delamere, hurriedly. "Let

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her have everything that a girl should have of her age and position. As to you, my poor little Joan, it seems to me that you are nothing but a drudge for your old father now."

"If you say that again, Daddy," said Joan, "I shall think that you don't appreciate me. I was always the home-bird. I've had a long turn away this winter,—quite as much as I have any wish for,—and as to racketting about, I never did care for it. I was always the one who stayed at home with mother when the others were gadding around. Don't trouble yourself about me. Look at me! Blooming as a rose, strong as a horse, patient as a mule, and perfectly happy and content to be with my old Daddy. And I beg you'll not say anything of the kind to me again. I shall take it very unkindly if you do."

"I won't, my dear little girl," said he; "I won't. I never made a favourite that I know among you, Joan," he said, getting up and standing half turned away from her; "I hope I never did; but I don't think that I can say fairly that any one of the others would have filled in the blank of the past fourteen months as you have done."

CHAPTER XV

INTO THE WORLD

IT was with a most peculiar feeling that little Joan found herself once more going into a ballroom. The occasion was one of a ball given by the bachelors of Blankhampton. It was held in the great Assembly Rooms, which were charmingly decorated with many plants and flowers; the string band of the cavalry regiment then quartered in the garrison had been requisitioned and all that was best and brightest in Blankhampton and its neighbourhood had been bidden and had gladly accepted the invitation. There was a large contingent of officers from each regiment then quartered at Blankhampton; a good sprinkling of clergy, a great many hunting men just about to take wing for other fields of sport or amusement, the whole of the gilded youth of Blankhampton itself, and all the prettiest girls to be drawn for miles around.

It was with pride that little Joan saw tall Agnes in her lovely white *débutante's* dress seized upon by a dozen goodly youths, each eager and anxious to find a place on her programme. For herself she had the peculiar feeling of a widow,—of one who has been through the gaieties of this life, and while in them is no longer of them. And she was only twenty years old.

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Her own dress was white, like her sister's, but, instead of being the pure white robe of a *débutante*, she had some touches of black velvet about it, and on her dress a great spray of pinkish orchids.

The first man who turned from Agnes to ask Joan for a dance filled her with dismay.

"I?" she said. "Oh, I don't think I'm going to dance."

"Not dance, Miss Joan? Why? What nonsense! Of course you are going to dance."

"I—I didn't mean to. Oh, no, I don't think I will. You see, I'm looking after my sister."

"But you have a chaperon? You are with Mrs. Freddy Delamere. She is your chaperon, surely."

"Aunt Eleanor? Yes. But I never thought of dancing."

"But you can think of it now."

"I suppose I can. I—oh, really, it is so long since I have danced I almost forget how to. Don't you think you could find somebody else?"

"I don't want to find anybody else," said the young man in rather a hurt tone.

"Oh, don't you? Then I will dance with you—at least, I'll—I'll try. Somehow, I never thought of dancing to-night. I only came because my sister Agnes was coming. Yes, any one you like. It's all one to me."

"You know, there's a man here who's very anxious to be introduced to you," said he.

"Is there? How foolish of him? How can men be so

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foolish as to ask girls that they haven't even seen take one turn round the room! Who is he?"

"He's a man who's been hunting here this winter. He's seen you several times about, and he's very anxious to make your acquaintance."

"Indeed. Oh, yes, you may introduce him, if you like; if he really wishes to. But, Mr. Snowden, don't give me partners out of kindness. It's no kindness to me. I didn't mean to dance to-night."

The young man laughed as he left her side and went across the room towards the door, where another man was standing. He was quite the usual type of man you meet with in a good hunting centre: spare and clean of limb, long of leg, and light in weight; with a clear-cut, rather clever face, piercing grey eyes under black level brows, and a mere thread of black above the mouth.

"May I introduce Sir Robert Masters, Miss Delamere?" said Snowden, as the pair reached Joan's side.

"Oh, certainly. How do you do?" said she to the newcomer.

"How do you do? May I have the honour of a dance?"

"If you like. I—I didn't mean dancing to-night. I haven't danced for some time," she added in a lower voice. "I don't suppose my step will suit yours a bit; but we can sit it out."

"Oh, yes, we can sit it out," said he.

His voice was very low and thrilling. Joan was interested in spite of herself, and I may say in spite of that other interest, so many thousand miles away.

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"I may take two?" said Sir Robert, quietly.

"Oh, yes, if you like—if you like to run the risk. You had better let me introduce you to my sister. I don't know if she has any dances left."

"Your sister?" said the other, enquiringly.

She indicated tall Agnes by the faintest possible gesture.

"Oh, is that your sister? I've seen you with her, I—excuse me, you are so awfully unlike."

"Yes, I have four sisters, all exactly like this one. I'm the little odd one—the odd man out, as far as looks go."

"Not in other ways?"

"No, thank goodness, not in other ways. We're a very chummy family. We never have fallen out, or anything of that kind." She turned and touched her sister on the arm with her fan. "Let me introduce Sir Robert Masters," she said.

Then Sir Robert asked for and obtained a dance from Agnes's almost filled programme. The girl was excited and a little inclined to toss her head over her success. Joan watched her with the expression of a mother—a little proud, very indulgent, wholly sympathetic.

"You are quite the little mother to this young sister of yours, Miss Delamere," said Sir Robert, as he moved back to Joan's side.

"Yes, I am quite the little mother since we lost our own. But I have two sisters older than myself."

"Really? I thought you were the eldest."

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"No. My eldest sister is Mrs. Billy Blake of the Black Horse."

"You don't say so?"

"Yes. And my next eldest sister has gone out to Australia to one of my brothers. She was in poor health and she wanted a change; and now he has got her there he won't let her come back again. I'm the eldest at home, you know."

And then young Snowden came back and told Joan that their dance was beginning.

"Miss Joan," he said, as they moved away, "that chap Masters is an awfully good fellow."

"He seems nice enough," said Joan.

"He seems what he is. Lord, you should see him ride to hounds! Straight as a die over everything. He can do what he likes with his horses; they jump like cats. I never saw anything like it. I've gone out, I give you my word, just for the pleasure of seeing that chap go at everything; just eager enough, never in the way of anybody; quiet, cool, collected. I haven't seen such a man for ages."

"Has he been popular down here this winter?"

"Oh, awfully popular. There isn't a man of any sort in the field that hasn't liked him. I believe he's going for a yachting cruise. After that over to Norway to put in a bit of salmon fishing; then back to town for the tail end of the season; then off in the yacht again to Trouville for the races; and then the usual round of country visits and shooting until it's time to hunt again. Lucky dog!

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What a comfort it must be to be sufficiently wealthy to indulge yourself in all these things, and entirely independent, so that you needn't consult a single soul in the world about any of your movements. Oh, by the bye," he went on, "did you hear that very queer story the other day about Mrs. Carruthers?"

"No," said Joan. "What was it?"

"It was very funny," said young Snowden. "Mrs. Fox-Atherley went to tea with Mrs. Carruthers the other day, and Mrs. Carruthers wanted to tell her something, so she told Maudie—who is eleven—to go out of the room. Maudie said, 'Shan't!' Mrs. Carruthers said, 'You must.' 'Shan't!' said Maudie. 'Then,' said Mrs. Carruthers, 'I shall have to put you out of the room.' As she looked rather threatening, Maudie beat a retreat; but at the door she turned round, saying, 'Now I understand father when he says, "Why did I marry this damned woman?"' "

"You made that up" said Joan, laughing in spite of herself.

"I didn't. Give you my word of honour. Mrs. Fox-Atherley told me."

"Mrs. Fox-Atherley ought to be ashamed of herself," said Joan; but her voice was shaking and her eyes were alight with laughter.

"Well, I suppose we ought all to be ashamed of ourselves when we speak of anybody to their discredit; but if ever I give rise to such a howling joke the whole world will be welcome to talk about it," he said, in amusement.

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She was still smiling when Sir Robert Masters came to claim his dance. "You have some tremendous joke on hand," he remarked, as he offered his arm.

Joan smiled back at him. "Yes, that bad boy has told me an exceedingly funny story."

"I guessed that. What was it about?"

"Oh, I don't think I'll repeat it. I'm no scandal-monger."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"I did."

"Why keep your enjoyment to yourself?"

"It does seem rather mean," said Joan. "I don't believe it was true for a moment."

"What was it about?"

"It was about Mrs. Carruthers. Do you know Mrs. Carruthers?"

"Oh, yes. Was it about Mrs. Fox-Atherley and Maudie?"

"Yes. Then you've heard it?"

"Yes, everybody heard it. It's been about for the last week or so. I believe it's absolutely true. But the funniest side of the story is something else."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Well, I was in the club the day before yesterday, looking over the papers after a very hard day's run,—eating muffins and drinking tea, if I tell the truth,—and Carruthers himself came in. Everybody regarded him with more or less interest, for they had all heard the story, and that great, foolish chap, Berkeley, who hasn't

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got the discretion of a mouse or the wisdom of a fly, swaggered across the room and dug him in the ribs. 'Well, Major,' said he, 'that's a funny story that's going round about your wife.' 'Eh? What?' said Carruthers. 'Story about my wife? What do you mean?' And sure enough, young Berkeley, with all the bounce of a cavalry soldier, let fly the entire story at unfortunate Carruthers, who would have been field-officer to him if he wasn't retired."

"What did Major Carruthers say?"

"Well, it wasn't what he said. He went absolutely purple, and was very shirty, indeed, over it. He confided to Berkeley's chief, who came in just as we were all looking seven ways for Sunday and Berkeley had bubbled out of the room, that he thought it was a beastly ungentlemanlike thing for a young fellow to tell a story like that about a married woman. And the chief said, in an awful voice, 'Are you telling me this officially?' 'No, sir,' said Carruthers, 'is it likely I'm telling you officially! I'm telling you as one gentleman to another. 'Well, as one gentleman to another, Carruthers,' said old Fitz-Alan, 'I think it's a thousand pities you weren't sharp enough to turn the tables on him.' 'Turn the tables!' thundered Carruthers. 'Yes,' said Fitz-Alan; 'if you had told him it was the best joke you had ever heard in your life, and that your wife would scream with laughter over it, you would have taken all the sting out of the boy. As it is, I am very much afraid that, unless you inform me of it officially, he's got the pull over you!'"

CHAPTER XVI

ROBERT MASTERS

IT is astonishing how intimate people can get during the course of a single evening. Now, Joan Delamere was a girl with whom it was not very easy to get intimate, yet somehow Robert Masters contrived to accomplish that end. He treated her from the first moment precisely as if he had known her since his boyhood, as if he had been one of the ordinary Blankhampton young men, who had gone to Edward the Sixth's school, and had drifted up to manhood just as the girls had drifted towards womanhood. He deliberately took advantage of Joan's determination not to dance much by declaring that he was utterly fagged out himself and had only joined in the ball because it would have seemed churlish, after spending a winter hand and glove with the men in and around Blankhampton, if he had held himself aloof.

"You and I, Miss Delamere, are quite staid and elderly people," he said to her, with the gravest possible face and without a twinkle in his steady grey eyes. "It's all very well for these youngsters to fag themselves out till their feet are ready to drop off their legs, and they don't know whether their heads are heads or plum-puddings. But you and I are wiser. We are going to sit out and enjoy rational conversation; we'll dance a little in between,

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and we'll go to supper together. I'm an excellent person to go to supper with, because I'm not above the good things of this world. I personally rather despise men who affect to despise what they eat and drink. When you don't learn to eat and drink with discretion, and you can't play a game of whist, what are you going to do in your old age? That's what I very often ask fellows."

"I don't know that you and I need trouble about our old age yet," said Joan.

"I don't trouble about it. It's no trouble to make a proper and suitable provision for it; it's the duty of every man and every woman. Now, down this corridor,—I daresay you know the rooms better than I do,—but down this corridor is the only comfortable seat in the whole building. Let us go and sample it."

If anyone had told Joan Delamere a couple of hours previously that she would, before midnight, be on terms of what looked like the closest intimacy with a person whom she had never seen in her life before, she would have stoutly declared that the suggestion was an utterly impossible one. Yet she went away that night back to Riverside and got into her little white bed with a feeling that, after all, life was worth living. Of course, he wasn't like Oswald Mainwaring. Nobody could ever be quite the same, or quite equal to him; but there was a something about him that she liked, a something that she felt was dependable, that she could trust. And then he was extremely attractive in person, with his steady eyes and his quiet, self-possessed manner. It was a different manner

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to Oswald Mainwaring's, much less ornate, much more direct; a man, Joan's thoughts ended, a man to make a friend of—not a lover; no, no, there was just something that she felt would never be the lover, but a man friend.

Of course, he called at Riverside on the following day, finding some half-dozen young men all more or less victims at Agnes's shrine. There were no victims at little Joan's excepting himself; and he was glad of it, because it gave him an opportunity of talking to her as he hardly could have done had he been only one of half a dozen. So, while the younger people sat in a gay group around the tea-table in the morning-room, Sir Robert Masters and Joan sat apart, near to the fire which blazed in the wide grate.

"What a delightful house this is!" he remarked, looking round for the twentieth time. "I have been here since the beginning of December, and now the hunting is just over. What a lot of time wasted! How was it, I wonder, that I never met you before?"

"We haven't been going out very much," Joan answered. "And now you have got to know us you are just going away. Somebody told me last night that you were going yachting."

"Yes, I have a yacht. I haven't definitely settled to take her out just yet."

"Oh, I thought you were going to Norway immediately?"

"Well, I did speak of it, but I don't think I shall go.

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Norway is all very well in the hot weather, when you have got nothing else to do, but I'm not desperately keen on salmon-fishing. I like it well enough, that's all."

"Oh! In any case, you won't be long in Blankhampton?"

"I suppose not. I'm very comfortable at the hotel I'm at. Yes, I'm at the Golden Swan. It's a very comfortable little place; they do me very well. I'm not gone yet, you know. Don't know that I shall just yet."

"But there's nothing for you to do. Hunting will be over directly."

"Yes, I know. But, you know, I've never been dull here on days when I couldn't hunt. So much depends on the kind of hotel one gets into. By the bye, Miss Delamere, what do you do with yourself all the time?"

"I? Well, I can hardly tell you. I'm a very busy person."

"Really?"

"Yes, very busy; extremely so. I have all the house and my father and brother to look after."

"Oh, yes, you have a brother?"

"Yes. He's a lawyer, like my father."

"I see. You look after them? How nice for them! I'm sure you do it beautifully. Are you very strict?"

"In some ways very strict," said Joan. "You know, there is a good deal to do in a house of this size; but nothing to what it used to be when it was full. Not that I spend all my time in the house. We used to be, when mother was alive,—we used to be always doing some-

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thing. We were thoroughly gay and happy and contented. And then she died, and everything seemed to break up, as if all life had gone out of us. And, somehow, we haven't got back into anything like the same life that we used to live."

"You took your mother's death frightfully to heart. I can see that," said Sir Robert Masters. "Some mothers are like that; and when they are taken away nothing seems able to replace them."

"Nothing could replace our mother," said Joan.

There was a momentary pause. Then he took up the conversation again, for he saw that the subject was still a very sore one with her. "It always seems to me," he went on, "that there's so much to do in Blankhampton. I never was in a place that 'went it' to such an extent."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, never. I've lived in London, and in Paris, but I never knew people go it as they do in Blankhampton. Life is one everlasting bustle. Why, I assure you, Miss Delamere, if I went to a tenth of the tea-parties I'm asked to, I should be a perfect martyr to dyspepsia."

"Oh, tea-parties," said Joan; "yes, they are rather numerous; but when we were gay we didn't go to so many tea-parties. I'm afraid there's always a sort of a tea-party going on here. You see, I have four sisters—my married sister, the one in Australia, one at school, and this one," indicating Agnes by a look.

"And you play golf?"

"Oh, yes."

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"You cycle?"

"Yes."

"And tennis?"

"Of course."

"And you put in a good bit of church-going?"

"Oh, a fair amount."

"And a certain amount of work among the poor?"

"Well, yes; we do our share of that."

"And you dance, and get us private theatricals, and sewing parties? And perhaps a Browning Society? And you collect china, and you paint in water-colours, and, oh! you have a very busy life, Miss Delamere, I know. Now, with me, I hunt every day that I possibly can. I don't want to do anything on an off day, and I don't want to do anything except eat my dinner and go to bed when I come home. It's an idle life, the life of a hunting man; the people who do one thing at a time are the idlest in the world. And all men's pursuits are the same. Men are intensely one-eyed people. Did it ever strike you?"

"No."

"Everything we do, we do an awful lot of. We shoot an awful lot, fish an awful lot; we hunt all the time, or we go to the ends of the earth to shoot big game. Everything that a man does, that he does with his heart, is done to the exclusion of everything else. Take the professions; it's exactly the same. A man's a lawyer; he does lawyering all day long, comes home, eats his dinner, goes to bed, and that's all. Then there's an actor; he stays in bed till late in the morning, gets up, takes a bit of a

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walk, makes an enormous meal at three o'clock, and hibernates until it's time to go to the theatre and do his whack there. A painter will paint all day long, until the light fails. A literary man is always steeped up to his eyes in ink. But women—oh, what wonderful creatures women are! I know a lady in London, Miss Delamere; she's a woman of about thirty odd. She is an actress by profession, a lady by birth, brilliantly educated. That woman does everything. She plays eight times a week in an utterly exhausting rôle, she paints pictures for the Academy, she writes stories for the magazines, she entertains largely, and she's seen here, there, and everywhere; and she makes her own hats. You put a man to do that—he wouldn't last a week. Oh, women are wonderful creatures! I scarcely ever go to that woman's house—and she's got the daintiest little house in Mayfair—that I don't find everything rearranged. Sunday, she tells me, Sunday morning she gives up to what she calls 'domestics;' that is to say, she washes the most priceless portion of her china collection, she looks over all her bibelots, she rearranges her rooms, she washes the dog, and thinks out anything especially connected with her toilet. She has never had time to get married, and a handsomer or more charming woman I don't happen to know."

"Does she look young?" said Joan.

"Oh, quite young. She might be anything over three-and-twenty. She's never tired. She does gymnastics every morning in her bedroom, and a different set every night when she goes to bed; she's invented a face-wash,

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she's intensely musical, and she has the finest collection of penny toys I ever saw."

"What a wonderful person! How is it you haven't persuaded her to——?"

"I? Oh, my dear Miss Delamere! A charming woman to know, a charming woman to make a lunch party for, charming photograph to have on your mantel-shelf, a person to talk about, a person whose acquaintance is a thing to be proud of, but as a wife—oh, well, fortunately, she wouldn't look at me."

"I don't think you ought to say *fortunately*."

"Yes, I'm speaking quite by the card. I ought to say *fortunately* because, you see, my ideal in life is to do a great deal of one thing at a time, so when I come back to my home I want somebody who would have some idea of reposefulness, who will have no great schemes on hand, who—oh, my dear Miss Delamere, imagine coming home from hunting, or from six weeks' salmon-fishing, or any of the other pursuits a man has, and finding a wife dining, say at six o'clock, because she had to go to the theatre at eight."

"Perhaps she would give up the theatre."

"She might. But do you think a woman who has been accustomed for years to eating her dinner at six o'clock, going to the theatre, and coming home to supper at half-past eleven, would be content to live the ordinary life of an ordinary woman? Oh, no, no! Believe me, I spoke quite by the card when I said *fortunately* she wouldn't look at me."

CHAPTER XVII

FRIENDSHIP

THE hunting season was quite over, and yet Sir Robert Masters lingered in Blankhampton. The excuses he invented for not hurrying away to seek for the wary salmon, or otherwise occupy himself, were as ingenious as they were many. He said that he had rarely been in an hotel so comfortable as the Golden Swan, that it was just the kind of old-fashioned hostelry in which he felt himself at home; that they had an excellent cook, and he had a most comfortable bed, and that the barmaids did not make eyes at him.

“I strongly object,” he remarked one day, in the sanctity of the Gentleman’s Club, to a select audience of three soldiers who were chaffing him on his having taken root for good and all in the old cathedral city, “I do most strongly object to living in an hotel where the barmaids make eyes at one. Now, these two girls here are ideal barmaids. They wouldn’t do in a railway station, of course,—they are not sufficiently scornful,—and they wouldn’t do in a West-End bar, like the Frivolity and such like, because they are not flashy enough, but they are absolutely distinguished in their way. They treat me as if I were sixty, and yet they never forget anything that I want. If anyone calls on me, I know it as soon as I come

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in. I get messages and letters and parcels without the smallest delay, and I shouldn't like to tell a risky joke to either of them. Oh, yes, the hotel has points, very definite points, or I shouldn't be here."

"Then you are thinking," said one of the soldiers, "of transferring one of the young ladies to—to your own place, and to your own name?"

"Well, I wasn't thinking of it," said Sir Robert Masters, coolly. "I admit a man might do worse, but the idea has not presented itself to me so far. Now you have put it into my head, I'll think it over. It's not a bad suggestion. But I think I should have to move very warily, for I'm not at all sure that both the young ladies haven't already booked themselves. What's the advice the old proverb gave about letting sleeping dogs lie and refraining from stirring up muddy water? Well, there isn't any muddy water here, and I don't know that the dogs that are sleeping are at all vicious, but perhaps, on the whole, I'd better let things go on as they are. They are perfectly satisfactory now; they mightn't be if I sought to make radical changes."

"What a rum chap Masters is!" said one soldier to the other, as they strolled away up the narrow, bustling street. "Did he mean all that about the barmaids?"

"Not a bit of it. He's got other fish to fry, has that chap. Couldn't you see it in his eye?"

"No, I couldn't," said the first speaker, "and I looked at him hard. I wasn't half sure that he wasn't pulling our leg all the time."

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It was, however, easy enough to make excuses to people outside the particular zone of interest which was attracting Sir Robert Masters at that time. Within that zone, however, curiosity was just as rife, and explanations were proportionately difficult to make.

"Why am I staying in Blankhampton?" said he to Joan one afternoon, about a month after the last hunting fixture. "Well, you know, Miss Delamere, I felt that I wanted a rest. You think it's odd, perhaps? It is, rather; but my belief is that when a man finds himself in a singularly good billet, it's practically an act of folly to shift himself out of it."

"Ah, you mean the hotel?"

"Yes; most comfortable hotel," he said, catching at the idea; "most comfortable. Let me live my own life; very decent, worthy, kind people; they make me most comfortable, and I like Blankhampton."

"It is so odd that you should like Blankhampton when the hunting is all over. I thought you would have flown away to 'fresh woods and pastures new' long ago."

"You made that quotation quite correctly," said he.

"What quotation?"

"'Fresh woods and pastures new.'"

"Did I?"

"Most people say 'Fresh *fields* and pastures new,'"

he remarked, quietly.

"Yes, I believe they do. How funny of you to notice it!"

"I notice everything that you do."

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“ Oh, don't say that !”

“ I do. Why do you say I mustn't notice it ?”

“ Because,” said Joan, promptly, “ you would notice it equally quickly if I made a mistake.”

“ I don't think you could make a mistake,” said he, gravely.

“ Oh, don't you? Don't you believe it, or expect me to believe that you believe it,” said Joan, bubbling over with laughter. “ But, seriously, Sir Robert, why do you like Blankhampton ?”

“ Because it's restful.”

“ The first time I ever saw you—I mean the first time you ever came here,” she said, correcting herself quickly, “ you told me that in Blankhampton people ‘ went it ’ more than in any place you had ever been in.”

“ Yes, they do; they go it most frightfully, and they have a sort of air of going it which is fetching to the last extent; but if you don't choose to go it you can equally well just float on your back and let the stream of life glide slowly past you, or quickly past you, which it likes. I went for a long walk this morning,” he continued, “ because, of course, it doesn't do to let one's self get entirely out of training, and I saw the country in a dress that I haven't seen it in for years, because, you see, I've always gone straight from the last day of hunting on to some other pursuit, either of pleasure in London, or of salmon-fishing in Norway or Ireland, or somewhere or other. So I got a new idea this morning,” he added, reflectively.

“ You don't say so ?”

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"I did. I've always in my heart just a little bit despised the old hunting men who hunted every day in the week all through the season, and then vegetated on their estates until it was time to get out their hunting things again. I begin to see they've got the best of it, or if they haven't got the best of it, they haven't got exactly the worst of it. I've been accustomed to see the country bare and brown, to love it best when it was wet and sloppy. For years I've never seen the primroses come out, or the green begin to burst on the trees, the hedges put on their summer robes; I've known nothing of the wonderful effect of spring. I walked out this morning right by Barningham Towers."

"That is ten miles," said Joan.

"Yes, it's about that. I went one way and I came back the other. A mile or so away from the house I turned aside from the road and went through a little spinney, and got on the track again at the other end. It was like standing on the threshold of another life, and my only feeling was one of regret that I had to let so many years go by during which I had treated the deep heart of the country with profoundest neglect. Those old country squires gain a good deal by staying at home."

"Yes, yes," said Joan; "but it doesn't make for interest, it doesn't improve the mental calibre of the human being to be always communing with Nature. It's very interesting to them, but it is intensely boring to other people. I think nothing makes men so utterly boring as when they can talk about nothing but their crops and

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such like. Take the ordinary agricultural labourer, for instance. How stupid he is! He knows when sheep's tails in the sky mean wind, and that a mackerel sky means wet, and he has a fair idea of what sort of weather there will be to-morrow; but that isn't everything in this life. I wouldn't regret so much if I were you; I wouldn't try to flatter myself that I am learning the deep heart of the country out of the Golden Swan Hotel at Blankhampton."

"You are too much for me, Miss Delamere," said he, in a crushed tone.

"I don't think you are staying here because of the deep heart of the country," went on Joan, inflexibly. "It's only my idea, you know; but that's just what I think."

"Perhaps not," he responded, meekly; "but I'm staying here, and I'm going to stay here for a time. I'm resting."

"On your oars?" said Joan.

"Well, perhaps not exactly on my oars; and yet in a measure—yes."

And so he stayed on and stayed on, through the bright spring days right into the golden summer. Once he went up to town for a few days, just to be best man at a wedding and to pay a visit to his tailor; but he kept his rooms on at the Golden Swan, and was very soon installed in them again.

"Oh, yes, I came back," he remarked to the first person he met as he went down St. Thomas's Street; "yes,

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I came back. I said I should. I haven't felt so well for years. You know I'm rather a delicate man."

"Oh, really, are you? Indeed. I shouldn't have thought it."

"No, my looks never pity me; and of course I hunt rather hard, and that gives people the idea that I never ail anything; but on the whole I'm not a very strong chap, and this place suits me down to the ground. No, I don't intend to stay here in August, not at all; but until August. I think I might just as well be here as grilling in London. You know what London life is for an unattached man—crawl down Piccadilly in the morning, crawl down again in the afternoon, put in at a dozen big tea-parties with an atmosphere like an unmentionable place, dine somewhere or other at night off a long and intricate string of indigestible and impossible dishes, do a theatre and supper, or half a dozen big parties with atmospheres worse than the atmosphere of the afternoon. I assure you, it is a fact. You don't get your leave in summer, my dear chap. If you did, you would know better what I am talking about. Why are they stuffier at night than they are in the afternoon? Well, partly because in the afternoon people stick their windows wide open with the idea that the summer air won't hurt them, and in the evening they shut in every window and every balcony with a tent of striped awning, partly to make the house bigger, and partly to shut out anything approaching to draughts. If women could only know what their fried faces look like under the electric light, they'd never go to an evening

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party at all. I know one woman,—a very handsome woman,—no, she's not young, not by a long way, but she's very good-looking. She gives up going to evening parties when her hair comes out of curl. The moment she goes home from an evening party and finds her hair sticking out in every direction she chucks evening parties for the rest of that season. That's the way to keep fresh, my boy, and it's a thousand pities that the rest of the women don't know it and live up to it. As for me, I've got a fancy to stay in Blankhampton. It's a ripping little place in a way. It's made a new man of me, by Jove! And I shall never forget or regret the months that I have passed in it."

CHAPTER XVIII

REAL FRIENDS

SIR ROBERT MASTERS continued his study of the deep heart of the country undeterred by the chaffing comments of his friends and acquaintances in Blankhampton. His pitch, if I may use such a word, was, however, not what in an ordinary sense could be termed the deep heart of the country, for day by day he was to be found sauntering along the river walk and turning in at the lower gate of Riverside at the hour approaching for afternoon tea. Sometimes he went to lunch, and at others he came back again for dinner; but he was always there to afternoon tea. He explained to Joan that the only "let-down," as he put it, of the Golden Swan was the little between meal which is known as afternoon tea.

"Now, you know, Miss Joan," he said one day, with a half apology for turning up again (for this was before he had got into the regular habit of coming as a matter of right), "you know, Miss Joan, a hunting man always wants his tea. He's had a stiff day's work—or play, which you like; he has had nothing, perhaps, but breakfast at some house or other, all lobster salads and aspic; or a sandwich out of his own case. It wants a couple of hours to dinner, and tea comes in as a sort of heaven-sent meal, a putting on of the time, a staying of the—

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well, of the inner man, Miss Joan; and somehow he gets into the way of wanting a cup of tea and a muffin or a tea-cake, or some unconsidered trifle of that kind, just to carry him along until the regulation time. It's astonishing," he added, "how soon a habit is formed. I miss my tea hideously if I don't get it."

"And they don't give you good tea at the Golden Swan? I'm surprised," said Joan.

"Well, I suppose it's good enough,—yes, I should say it was,—but somehow it isn't like yours, you know. By the way, do you stay here all through August?"

"Oh, no; we always go to Rockborough in August."

"Do you? Nice place?"

"Well, yes, it's nice enough; nicer than Brighton. You know, there are cheap trips, and the place is a little full at times; but it's gay and bright, and the air is lovely."

"I see. I don't know that I shan't go to Rockborough this year."

"You go to Rockborough!" echoed Joan.

"Why shouldn't I go to Rockborough?"

"I don't know. It seemed funny; that was all."

"I've known fellows who went to Rockborough to get picked up against the winter season," he went on, in rather an ill-used tone; "I've known ever so many fellows who swear by the air of Rockborough. There's a spa thing, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes; there's a gorgeous spa."

"And a pier, too?"

LITTLE JOAN

"Oh, yes. And bathing-house."

"And one could have a couple of horses there?"

"Well, you could."

"And something to drive?"

"Yes, certainly; and there's the usual round. Oh, I don't say anything against Rockborough."

"I don't feel like going to Norway this year. I don't want to kill anything until November. I hate French watering-places,—I don't gamble,—and I think Rockborough will be good enough for me."

"Oh, it's good enough in a way."

"At all events, you won't mind if I go, will you?"

"Mind? Rockborough doesn't belong to me," said Joan, laughing outright.

"Miss Joan, you know very well what I mean; you know perfectly well what I am leading up to. I have been coming here every day now for months—or nearly every day——"

"I think we may say *quite* every day, Sir Robert," said Joan.

"Well, there's only one thing I should like to come for—and that's you."

The girl flushed up rosy red, then went ghastly pale. "Oh, you don't mean it!" she cried. "Oh, you couldn't mean it. You—you are not a marrying man. Everybody says so."

"I never said so," said he.

"No, I don't know that you did. But everybody else did."

REAL FRIENDS

"But everybody else doesn't count," returned Sir Robert.

"Oh, but why did you say it? Why—er—oh, I wish you hadn't! Why are you men always the same? Why can't you be content as you are?"

"Well, we never are. We—that is to say, I—have been content enough all these years,—thirty-two of them,—but you can't go on being content for ever, you know. You would stick fast."

"Oh, yes; in a general way."

"But is it quite impossible, Miss Joan?"

"Oh, yes, Sir Robert, it's quite impossible. Now we can never be friends again. It is too bad of you."

"There's no reason why we shouldn't be friends. I'm very sorry if I have entirely misunderstood you. You—you—needn't visit it on me."

"Oh, Sir Robert, you—I don't know what to say."

"Say 'yes,'" he put in, eagerly.

"Oh, I can't say 'yes.'"

A new idea dawned upon Robert Masters. "There is,—then, there is somebody else? You—you are not engaged?"

"No, I'm not exactly engaged."

"You don't dislike me?"

"Not at all."

"In fact, you rather like me than otherwise?"

"I like you very much."

"Then what's to hinder my project from going through?"

LITTLE JOAN

"Oh, you don't understand. I—I couldn't. I'm not—that is to say, I don't want to marry you."

"But you don't want to quarrel with me? There's no earthly reason why we should quarrel. I never could see, when a man particularly wants to marry a lady and she doesn't see matters in the same light, or other circumstances intervene, they need be at daggers drawn. I'm not going to be at daggers drawn with you, Miss Joan. If I can't have you for my wife, then I should like to continue being your friend."

"Would you, really? That is very sweet of you; that is really what I call nice of you."

"Yes, I think it is rather nice," he admitted. "It's a bit of a let-down for a man when he finds he isn't as acceptable as he flattered himself he might be; but to a really starving man half a loaf is certainly better than no bread."

"Then we'll make a compact," said Joan. "We won't talk of this again, we won't refer to it, or revert to it in any way. We will be friends—we will be real friends, Sir Robert, without any idea of anything else."

"Yes, we will be real friends. Oh, we'll be out-and-out pals, eh? And then, if people begin to talk——"

"I don't mind."

"But they will, you know; particularly if I go to Rockborough. I should like to go to Rockborough, if you don't mind. When I have once made my plans, I hate disarranging them. I had quite settled in my own mind that I would spend August at Rockborough, and if

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you don't mind I should like to carry out my original programme."

She smiled. A thought flashed into her brain that it was not very long ago that Sir Robert Masters had quickly and easily, apparently quite without effort, abandoned his intention of going that year to fish in Northern waters.

"I hate changing my plans, too," she said. "If you want to go to Rockborough, there's no earthly reason why you shouldn't; but not with any idea that I—I——"

"That you will change your mind?" he asked.

"I don't think I shall change my mind, Sir Robert. I——"

"There's somebody else," said he. "I know it; I can see it in your face."

"Yes," she said, looking at him frankly, "there is somebody else."

"You never told me about him."

"I couldn't tell you. There's nothing to tell. I'm not engaged—perhaps I never shall be. I haven't even promised to wait, and I don't think he has. But I promised myself; and it wouldn't be fair to you not to tell you—not to tell you everything."

"He is here? In Blankhampton?"

"Oh, no; he is in India."

"Oh, I see. Forgive me, Miss Joan. I'm awfully sorry that I should have touched upon a subject that must be not a little painful to you. Forgive me for what I said

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to-day—forgive me, and forget it. I won't refer to it again. And we are friends?"

"Oh, yes," said Joan, putting her hand into his, "I hope for always."

He certainly behaved admirably, both then and afterwards. He stayed with her until it was his customary time to leave, and then he left her, looking just as usual. There were no crushed airs about him, no sulking, no pettishness—simply a frank and manly acceptance of the inevitable.

"I shall see you to-morrow," he said, "because I have to bring you that book I promised to get for you. It will come to-morrow morning."

"That's awfully good of you," said Joan. "Good-bye till to-morrow."

She watched him go along the garden, down the terraces which led to the lower gate, with a very grave face. "That's a clean, honest, wholesome gentleman," she said to herself. "Joan Delamere, Joan Delamere, why couldn't you marry him? Why does the other come in between you? Why are you as you are? Oh, Joan, oh, Joan, you never did a crueller thing in your life than when you stabbed that man right through the very heart."

But there was no trace, when she and Sir Robert Masters met again, that he had been conscious of stabs through the heart or anywhere else. He behaved exactly as if nothing had happened, as if nothing particular had taken place between them. He took the same open interest in her and all her doings, addressed her as "Miss

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Joan," just as he had done from the beginning, expatiated to outside observers on the excellent results of a rest in Blankhampton, and finally transferred himself to Rockborough without any apologies to anybody.

With Rockborough he was charmed; indeed, his pleasure was pathetic. "I can't imagine," he said to Joan, the very first evening, when they were walking down the cliff together to hear the band play on the wide terrace at the foot thereof, "I can't imagine what people want to run away from their own country for. Always seems to me that you get the best of it in England—good band, nice, good-tempered, well-dressed people, good air, perfect scenery, and a something in the way of charm that no foreign place that I have ever been to possesses."

"I don't know much about foreign places," said Joan. "I should like to. It has always been rather a dream of mine to travel."

"Yes, you get the best of it when you dream about it," said he, decidedly. "There are one or two little places in Germany that are interesting—I mean that are nice to live in for a few weeks. South of France isn't bad, but of course I don't know it very well. I used to go there when I was a boy, and my mother was an invalid, and I used to spend my Christmas holidays with her."

"Is your mother living?"

"No; my mother is dead. I have very few relations. I have a sister, but she was married years and years ago; and I haven't seen very much of her, because she's in India, you know."

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“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Of course, I write to her sometimes. I write to her on her birthday, Christmas, and on other occasions of that kind. That’s not like being pals with a sister who lives in the next street.”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t imagine drifting away from any of my people. We are an awfully united family. There are such a lot of us; we have to be—I mean, we have never thought of being anything else. Now, my sister, who is out in Australia, she will be coming back by and by; at least, I am not quite sure; I rather fancy that something’s going on out there.”

“What sort of something? Love affair?”

“I fancy there’s somebody, or something, because she’s put off coming home several times. Of course, Eric wants to keep her as long as he possibly can, but I fancy, all the same, that she might possibly stay out there much longer than she dreamed of when she left home.”

CHAPTER XIX

BETWEEN THE LINES

A MONTH is soon gone when one is spending it happily. The Robert Delameres had for twenty years past made a rule of spending August at Rockborough, taking always the same house on the Esplanade and living in great comfort and ease, so that Mr. Delamere might get full advantage of change and rest from professional worries. This year Joan had suggested that the house would be rather large for them, but Mr. Delamere would not hear of taking any other.

"No, no," he said; "it isn't necessary to use all the rooms because we happen to have them. I'm used to that house; I should hate any other one. It might have uncomfortable beds, or easy-chairs one couldn't sit down in, and a dozen other objections. When you've got a thing that suits you, Joan, stick to it. It's an excellent motto, and one I have always found to work admirably."

So they were at the same house which they had occupied for twenty years past, and there Robert Masters made himself as much at home as ever he had done at Riverside; in fact, except that he slept, breakfasted, and occasionally dined at his hotel, he might well have been supposed to be staying in the house. Agnes had a train of admirers and changed them from day to day; Joan's

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cavalier was always Robert Masters. There was only one break during the whole month, which was when he ran over to Blankhampton for the day to swear something before a Registrar, an official of which the little seaside town of Rockborough did not boast. It was astonishing how Joan missed him. She felt as if her other self had gone, and she felt it with a pang of reproach which made her for a few hours abjectly miserable. All the same, she was so glad to see Sir Robert when he came back again that she forgot her misery and was the gayest of the gay during the rest of the evening. He had found time to execute several small commissions for her in Blankhampton, and he came round to the house just as they were finishing dinner, carrying several little white parcels hanging from a string.

“Well, how was Blankhampton looking, Sir Robert?” cried Agnes, as he entered the dining-room.

“It was looking rather baked, Miss Agnes. I met three men I knew, who spoke very feelingly about the grind of being shut up in an oven during the hottest month of the year. But, then, soldiers must have something to grumble about, Miss Aggie. If the army hadn’t something to grumble about, I really don’t know what soldiers would do for a living; and if there is a department in the whole of the service that wants overhauling, the cleansing of the Augean stable, the complete uprooting of the entire system, it is not the department to which an ordinary cavalry officer belongs.”

“What department is it?” asked Joan.

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“By all accounts the Army Medical is in about the worst way that it is possible to conceive. I met a man not very long ago who told me a lot of things about the internal economy of the Army Medical Department. I met another chap yesterday,—at least, we had lunch together at the Club,—who has just come down from Chertsey Camp, a big station, as you know, with thousands of men in it. If you will believe me, this man told me that for three weeks they were without a clinical thermometer in the entire military hospital; they had no linseed to make poultices; they possessed two bronchitis kettles, one that was in holes, and the other which had never been used; they had never heard of oxygen, didn’t allow thyroid gland, and when a certain great personage staying in the Camp was taken desperately ill, the doctors sent over to the hospital for some pilospongine, and there wasn’t an inch of it in the whole establishment; in fact, the doctors had never heard of it!”

“Then, what do they do if a man gets very ill?” cried Agnes.

“Oh, if a chap gets very ill, he dies. If there is the smallest ailment that the medicos don’t understand, they invalid him out of the service—a grand system, in which the weakest goes to the wall and the devil takes the hindmost. I never heard a man rave in my life like the man who told me. And then he pathetically wound up: ‘Poor chaps, they’ve only one life to live, after all!’”

“Do you think it is true?” said Joan.

“Oh, I suppose so. The man wouldn’t dare make such

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statements as that if he hadn't good grounds for them; in fact, to tell you the truth, he poured out such horrors to me all lunch-time that I had to have a liqueur brandy to pull myself together afterwards."

"You don't mean it?"

"I do mean it, solemnly. And then I got myself free on the plea of having commissions to do. I went to match your linens—I mean threads."

"Yes, yes, linen threads," said Joan. "Well, it's awfully kind of you. You might just as well have come round to dinner, all the same."

"Thanks, very many. But I only got back in time to scramble into my clothes and get a very hurried dinner. By the bye, Miss Agnes, I have brought you some sweets from Bonner's."

"Have you really now? That is very nice of you. I wonder if you know which kind of sweets I like?"

"I think so," said Robert Masters, in his easiest tones. "It is not difficult to find out in a shop where a young lady goes every day." And he handed over an opulent-looking parcel to the laughing girl, who retired to the other end of the table with her younger sister, and in a moment the two ruddy heads were eagerly bent down over the box.

"If you young people are going down to the Spa to-night," said Mr. Delamere, as he rose from the table, "you must go without me."

"Why, dear?" exclaimed Joan.

"I have a couple of letters I must write. I forgot

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them, and must catch the nine o'clock post. So do you all go on when you feel inclined to do so, and I'll come down and join you as soon as I have finished. Masters," he added, "you'll have a smoke before you go, won't you? You look after him, Joan."

"By the way, Mr. Delamere," said Sir Robert, suddenly, "I've a packet of letters for you. I saw your son at the station; he particularly wanted these conveyed to you. I'm so awfully sorry, I quite forgot that I had them in my pocket. And he said they were most important."

The elder man took the letters with a smile and a word of thanks, and went away with them in his hand. The young people stayed for a few minutes, chatting gayly, and then the girls went and put on their evening wraps, and they went off together to the place of meeting for all sorts and conditions of people in Rockborough.

Joan was inexpressibly happy that night. She was so happy that she hardly knew it—at least, she was hardly conscious of it. There was a sense of restfulness and repose about the company of Robert Masters that appealed to her best nature. If anyone that evening had asked her suddenly whether she preferred Oswald Mainwaring to Robert Masters, she would unhesitatingly have replied that Mainwaring had the preference; and yet, as she and her father, a couple of hours later, turned in at the gate of the house on the Esplanade, it was almost with a pang of dismay that she heard from him that among the letters Robert Masters had brought from

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Blankhampton was one for her with an Indian post-mark.

There was always a little gathering around the dinner-table when they came in from an evening spent on the sea front, for the sharp sea air made them all as hungry as if they had been to a theatre. There was generally a dish of sandwiches, a cake to cut, and a jar of biscuits, while whiskey and soda and claret were there with which to wash them down. Joan put the letter down on the table, and went on talking to her father as if it were but an ordinary note; but by the time she got to her bedroom her pulses were beating fast, and her heart was in her mouth.

It was quite an ordinary letter. It told that he had been laid up with a sharp attack of fever, that he loathed India, and meant to get out of it at the earliest possible opportunity; that, as far as making or saving money went, the place was a beastly fraud, and the writer more than hinted that the fate which had overshadowed all his early years had begun to dog his life again now.

What did he mean by that? She laid the letter down with a great sense of bitter disappointment. What did he mean? Was he thinking about money? Of course. Poor thing, poor fellow, he was always thinking about money, because he had such a want of it, and so little of it seemed to come his way. But the fate that had shadowed all his early years? Of course, he meant that he would have to marry for money. Could that possibly be it? Was he delicately hinting that he might not in

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the end prove as faithful to his heart's love as he had sworn to be?

The hot tears rushed smarting to her eyes at the very thought that he had found it necessary to take so round-about a way of breaking the news to her. Besides, it was so unnecessary. She took up the letter and read it again. It was unmistakably the handiwork of a very unhappy man. Well, she would write to him at once; she would set his mind free. He should be free—he was free.

And so, instead of getting into bed, she sat down at the little writing-table near the window, where the sweet salt air was blowing freshly in upon her, and wrote to the man she loved.

“I can quite easily read between the lines of your letter,” she began. “I wish you had written to me in plainer terms; it would have been easier for both of us. I know exactly what you are feeling, dear Ozzie. I have longed to have some word of you, to know how things were going, to know if you are very unhappy out there. And now I almost wish that you had not written.

“My dear, you are as free as air to do what and as you like. We agreed on that, if you remember; and I wouldn't dream of going back from my bargain. I am—well, not quite what I used to call happy, because our house has never been the same since our terrible trouble. We are at this moment at Rockborough, but we go home

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next week, and if you find it necessary to write to me again, write to me there. I don't think, dear, that I'll try to write you a long chit-chat letter full of news. Somehow, in the face of yours, it seems so out of place. I feel that the essential thing is that I should tell you you are free in every sense of the word.

"I have only now to say 'God bless you always.' It is the sincere wish of your faithful friend,

"JOAN DELAMERE."

So that was the end of it all—the end of it all. She had loved with every fibre of her being; nay, she *did* love. Her hands were trembling, her eyes were smarting with tears, and the painful, vivid past came back, as it were, borne upon the sea-laden air. Oh, should she ever smell the odour of brine again without this moment of pain coming back to her!

But it wasn't his fault. What was a man to do, a man of position, in debt, no money, breaking his heart in a country and amid a life that he loathed and detested? What was he to do? Nothing, nothing, nothing. And for her there only remained one thing, to send off on its long journey the missive which would tell him that old ties were snapped in twain.

CHAPTER XX

COMING HOME

IT is a hard task to describe closely the feelings of little Joan at this juncture of her career. Having finished the letter to Oswald Mainwaring, and put the requisite number of stamps on it, she set it in a conspicuous place on her toilet-table and, going to the window, looked out into the night. It was very calm and still. The sky was of such a deep blue that the stars looked like living jewels set in a bed of liquid sapphire; she could catch now and again a gleam upon the water, and she could hear the steady rhythmical splashing of the waves upon the rock-bound shore. All Rockborough seemed to be asleep. It was an early place, where those who came for health and recreation lived as simple a life as if they were in a little German spa. There was never a sound of revelry by night in Rockborough, unless it was in the fishing town, which stretched right up either side of the bay. She felt, somehow, as if a great load had fallen off her. The tears were still smarting on her cheeks; her heart was heavy, heavy as lead; and yet she felt that she had come to know the worst of life. There had been this feeling always that something would arise to come between her and Ozzie. She sat down there by the window, and resting her chin upon the palms of her

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hands, she let her mind slip back to those quiet, glorious days when he had been the main note of interest in her life. Dear, handsome, unfortunate, tender-hearted, kind, and charming Ozzie. She began to feel, in a dull, dim kind of way, as a condemned person may feel when he knows that all chance of reprieve has come to an end, when he can feel the touch of the rope about his neck.

Well, her little love-story had come to an end. Ozzie was going to carry out his original programme; he was going to sell himself to the highest bidder. And she—well, she was almost glad that the blow had fallen.

At last she shut down the window and got into bed, not with any idea of sleeping. And yet she did sleep, fell asleep like a child, and awoke the following morning when the maid appeared at her bedside with her early cup of tea. She thought the situation over while she was drinking it. It was all over between her and Ozzie. He had cried off his bargain; he wanted to be free. She had only now to wait until he ratified the breaking of the very shadowy bond between them by replying to her letter.

"Something has happened to you," said Robert Masters, when they met a couple of hours later. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. What makes you think so?"

"I think so because I see a difference in you."

"Oh, nonsense! I think I've got a touch of headache this morning. It's nothing."

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“ Well, I thought—I thought there was a difference. I thought something had happened to you ; that was all.”

It flashed into her mind that his had been the hand to deal the blow to make the difference. Well, he didn't know anything about that. It was no use questioning him. It would be like asking him to say over again what he had said a few weeks previously.

She made an enormous effort that day to be gay. They were going on some little expedition into the country to eat lunch at some gardens five or six miles away, a lunch of strawberries and things—you know the kind of lunch : salmon out of the river hard by, a chicken out of the adjacent poultry-yard, and strawberries freshly gathered. Robert Masters thought that he had never seen Joan so gay in manner, and so merry in herself, in all the months that he had known her. He was certain that something had happened to cause the change. But still, if she wouldn't confide in him, he was compelled to remain with his doubt unsatisfied.

So the incident passed over ; the stay at Rockborough came to an end, and the Delameres went back to Riverside. Then, indeed, Robert Masters betook himself away for a time from Blankhampton. He had business to do in London, and a great many visits to pay before the autumn shooting. I think if he had asked Joan to marry him any time during the month that followed their return from Rockborough, she would have accepted him, and there would have been an end of my story. Not that she was conscious of it. If anyone at that time had

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suggested to her that she would in all probability one day be Robert Masters's wife, she would have scouted the idea with scorn, for it had become part of Joan's religion to be faithful to Mainwaring. Therefore, being unconscious, she made no sign to him that a second declaration would be welcome, and Robert Masters never once thought of making it.

He wrote to her every few days after they parted, long, chatty, friendly letters, such as any woman, young or old, likes to receive, telling her of his doings, unfolding his plans, asking for news of her and hers.

So September went over and October came in, and just as the second week of October was drawing to a close she had news of Mainwaring. By then sufficient time had elapsed for her to receive an answer to her letter, and as she had Indian letters that morning, she knew that there was no letter from him by that mail. Well, it was possible he had been away, gone on a trip somewhere or other, and that he had missed the chance of writing. She must possess her soul in patience yet another week. Then later in the day she received a message from him. It was brief, but to the point: "Consider letter unwritten. Coming home. Mainwaring."

Consider letter unwritten! Consider letter unwritten! What could it mean? Coming home! That meant that he was going to start at once. He would be home in about three weeks. Something must have happened; some change must have taken place in his arrangements,

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possibly in his fortunes, and she must possess her soul in patience for at least three weeks.

I may as well own to it that the following three weeks were the most terrible time of suspense that Joan had ever known in her life. And even then he did not come in until nearly ten more days had gone by; and then he came walking up the drive in the old accustomed way, looking, except that he dressed in black, very much as he had used to do; a little browner perhaps, a little older, but he came into the room with the same quick, alert manner that she knew so well, shut the door quickly behind him, and seemed to make but one step to the fireplace by which she was standing.

“My Joan! Little girl! It’s all over. All the waiting, the suspense, everything. You and I are going to be as happy as the angels in heaven.”

“I—I don’t understand,” said Joan.

“It doesn’t matter the least in the world whether you understand. There’s only one thing that either you or I need understand of each other, and that,” bending his head down to the level of hers, “that is what we understood very well when we parted.”

“Something has happened?” said Joan. Her lips were trembling, her breath came in gasps, her eyes were wide open with apprehension, her heart was beating like a sledge-hammer.

“Oh, don’t you understand?” He took her little face between his hands, and looked down into it long and lovingly. “Don’t you understand? It’s all fallen away

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from me, that hideous burden of poverty that I have been groaning under all my life. I hate to rejoice in somebody else's misfortunes, but there's nobody between me and the title now, Joan; and I feel rather chilly sitting up here in state. Won't you come and share it with me?"

"I don't understand," said Joan.

"No? I thought perhaps you might have heard. Haven't you seen the papers?"

"Yes. I haven't seen anything about you."

"Oh, it's too dreadful to tell you—too dreadful. Kenneth Mainwaring is dead,—carried off in one week by malignant fever. It killed the old man. He never held up his head again. He had a stroke and died before they could communicate with me."

"And you are Lord Moresby?"

"I am."

"You are Lord Moresby?"

"You don't love me any the less for that? Why, little girl, little girl, you wouldn't have minded if I'd come into a royal kingdom, would you? You are—we'll be married at once. We won't wait. My mourning can serve as a decent excuse for having it all fixed up, so that we can go away and try to make up for the time that we have wasted."

"Oh, I couldn't—I couldn't!" said Joan. "I couldn't."

"You couldn't what?"

"I couldn't be married—not yet."

"You couldn't be married! Do you realize what you are saying?"

COMING HOME

“I think so. It’s so sudden. It’s come upon me with such a shock. I’d made up my mind to let you go, Ozzie—I made up my mind to let you go. I’ve been steeling myself all these weeks, all these months. And then to have you come in and tell me this. Oh, it’s horrible, it’s horrible!”

He saw that she was shaking like a leaf from head to foot. She covered her eyes with her hands, and he noticed how thin and transparent they were. “You have been ill! You have been ill, Joan!” he exclaimed.

“No, not ill.”

“Oh, but you are thin; you are pale. You have been breaking your heart. My poor little girl, it has been too much for you! I understand—I sympathize. I felt just like it myself—too shy to come back to you, almost too nervous to take my ticket for Blankhampton. And yet, Joan, I didn’t waste any time on the road; oh, no, not a day, not an hour, not a moment. But you’ll get used to it. I’ll see your father to-night. I’ll explain everything; how hopeless it all was, how much we loved each other. You do love me?”

“Oh, yes, Ozzie.”

“You are sure you love me? Why, of course. How absurd! As if I could insult you by doubting it. Forgive me. I didn’t mean to put such a question to you. I have been so miserable, Joan, that sometimes I asked myself if I was in my right senses. Sometimes I used to sit and look at your photograph and wonder if I ever knew you, if you ever belonged to me, if I ever really——

LITTLE JOAN

Oh, what rubbish I'm talking! We'll talk rubbish for an hour or so, darling, and then we'll talk hard, common-place sense. And then I'll have a long business talk to your father, and then we'll get married, and then we shall come to our senses, don't you think?"

"I don't know what my father will say."

"Say? Be jolly glad, I should think. I know I am. I don't believe you are. And yet you must be. Poor little soul! I've upset you. I ought to have broken it to you. I ought to have written, wired, done something. I didn't think what a shock it would be to you. It never occurred to me." Then he drew her into his arms once more. "How I have hungered for you all through the hot, stifling, weary, sultry, breathless days; all through the dead, nerveless nights. It's a beastly life. I've heard fellows talk of it with joy; I've heard women rave about the delights of India. Oh, God, if they knew. But now it's all over; it's come to an end. I was so sorry for the old lord, so sorry for that poor young man, and his mother—stripped of everything in a few days. And yet, I can't help remembering the old saw, that one man's poison is another man's meat, and—— Why, Joan, Joan!"

But Joan did not answer. On the contrary, she slipped out of his arms in a dead faint at his feet.

CHAPTER XXI

THE NEW LORD MORESBY

THE new Lord Moresby was very discreet. When he realized that little Joan had collapsed in a fainting heap upon the floor, he promptly picked her up and put her on the sofa which stood at right angles to the fireplace. Then he rang the bell for William.

“Oh, bring a little brandy and some water, will you?” he said. “Miss Joan isn’t quite well. I’m afraid she fainted.”

“Certainly, sir,” said William, who had no idea of the change in Moresby’s fortunes.

The good man bustled out, and came back in a few minutes with some brandy, followed by one of the maids carrying a carafe of water.

“I will just loosen Miss Joan’s neck,” she said. “She’s fainted once or twice like this. You remember, William, just before we went to Rockborough, how ill she was?”

“I knew she had been ill. And she declared she hadn’t,” said Moresby. “Can you do that?” he added to the maid, who was endeavouring to take a brooch out of her young mistress’s collar.

“Yes, sir. The brooch has caught in the lace, that’s all. There it is. Now, just a little water, William—a

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little on her hands, and a little on her temples. There—yes, that's it. Now a little drop of the brandy. Make it rather strong. No, don't lift her up, sir. You should lay them down flat when they are like this, as flat as you can. She'll come to in a minute. A wee drop of that brandy, William."

They raised Joan's head, put the brandy and water to her lips, and then laid her flat upon the sofa, the maid taking the pillows from under her head. "She's coming round," she said. "I'd just open that window, William."

With a sigh and a shiver Joan Delamere came back to her own senses again.

"Oh, dear, is that you, Margaret?" she asked, feebly. "What happened? Did I topple over, or something? How stupid of me!"

"Never mind, Miss Joan. Just drink a little of this. You haven't been quite well. A little brandy and water will soon pull you together again."

"Oh, not brandy, Margaret."

"Yes, miss, if you please. You know what the doctor said last time—a little brandy and water."

By dint of some persuasion and coaxing, she got Joan to gulp down the contents of the glass which she held to her lips. Then Joan struggled to a sitting position and looked up piteously at Moresby.

"Dear me, how stupid of me! I must have gone off completely."

"You did. You nearly frightened me out of my wits. I thought you had died."

THE NEW LORD MORESBY

"If I were you, Miss Joan, I'd sit in this big chair," said the maid; "not where you are now. A cup of hot tea will pull you together, and you won't know that you have been any the worse. If you should feel inclined to go off again, Miss Joan, have a little sal volatile. I'll go and bring it down, so that it will be ready."

"She's such a good girl," said Joan to Moresby, as Margaret went out of the room, "so sympathetic and kind. I'm awfully sorry I gave you such a fright."

He drew a chair near to her and sat down, taking hold of her hand. "Joan, you did give me a fright," he said, looking at her with grave, kind eyes. "I thought it was all over with you for a minute. I'm not accustomed to seeing anybody go down as if they had been struck by a mighty hand. You know, it's made me feel quite sick."

And, true enough, he was shaking all over. It was then her turn to comfort him, and presently William brought the tea, and some of the little hot cakes that Moresby remembered of old, and which he told her he had yearned fiercely for during his exile in India.

"Isn't it wonderful," he said, "what a turn of the wheel brings? Here was I only the other day feeling I hadn't got the faintest chance of ever sitting in this room and eating your little hot cakes again; and here were you feeling that you had got to give me up; and yet this blessed afternoon we are here together, and it is the beginning of always. Oh, Joan, Joan, is it wicked to rejoice in my good fortune?"

She stirred uneasily. "No, I don't think it is exactly

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wicked. It would have been if you had done anything to bring it about. But you didn't, did you?"

"No, not in the least; of course not. Joan, you are not half as glad as I am."

"I—I am not very well," said Joan. "I—you see, Ozzie, you have had time to get used to it; you have known the truth for some weeks. Now, I never suspected a thing until this afternoon. I only knew you were coming home. I didn't know why, or how. It has been rather a shock to me."

"I know. It's all my stupid, blundering fault. I haven't common patience with myself. I suppose I can stay to dinner?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"Did you tell them I was coming home?"

"No."

"You never told them about my having come into the title?"

"How could I?"

"Ah, I forgot—yes, I forgot. We'll be married at once, Joan."

"You said so before," said Joan; "and I said that I should have to get used to it, didn't I?"

"Oh, but you will be used to it in a week. I was."

"No, you can't be used to it yet. Have you been to see your new house?"

"No, I came to see you. I didn't bother about the place, or anything of that kind. I didn't even go and see the town house. I came straight to you."

THE NEW LORD MORESBY

For a brief space Joan did not speak. Then she put out one little slim hand and laid it over his. "It was very sweet and good of you, Ozzie," she said, gently; "yes, it was very good of you. I feel so stupid, as if words were inadequate, as if—— You see, I had quite given you up. I had quite made up my mind that I had to let you go. I wasn't even sure that you wanted me any more. I knew a girl once," she went on, "who was engaged to a man in India. If you had talked to her for ten thousand years, you wouldn't have made her believe that anything could come between them; you wouldn't have got her to believe that the man didn't care for her. He *did* care for her, but on her side it was adoration. She idolized him. Then one morning she got a letter to say it was all at an end, that he didn't care about her any more—he liked somebody else better. He *had* cared, oh, yes, but——"

"And you thought that I might be the same young man over again? Then, you see, little girl, you have made a mistake; and for that you will have to do penance. Gad," he said, catching hold of her and bending his head so that he could look right into her clear eyes, "it's a good deal more likely that the boot's on the other leg this time. I don't believe, little girl, you are half as glad to see me as I am to see you. I don't believe you have thought about me half as much as I have thought about you. Now, own up. Tell me, are you really glad to see me?"

"Oh, Ozzie, you know I am glad to see you. You

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know I have thought about you, dreamed about you, longed for you, broken my heart over you."

"Did you think, dear little girl, that I wasn't dreaming about you, longing for you, yearning fiercely for the time when I should get home; wondering whether I should ever get home sometimes, whether I should die out in that horrid climate, and at other times wondering whether I should get back to find you gone, married by some other fellow? Every week when the mail came in I have scanned the English papers, and read that first column as I never read it in my life before. Nay, I did more than that. I used to go up every mail day and call on a lady in the regiment because I knew she always got the *Queen* out from England, and I used to read all the announcements of engagements—you know the column I mean, 'a marriage has been arranged,' etc., and every time I breathed a sigh of relief to find that your name wasn't there."

"I know; yes, I know," said Joan, in a distressed tone, "exactly what you are feeling, I know exactly what you were feeling then, I knew it all along. And yet—yet——"

"And yet what?" he asked.

"Do you think we shall ever be quite the same again, Ozzie?"

"The same! Why, what do you mean?"

"Well, it all seemed so hopeless. You made up your mind that you had to let me go, didn't you?"

"In a sense I did."

"You had someone else in your thoughts?"

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“In my heart, never.”

“Not in your heart. In your thoughts. It is—oh, I don’t know how to say it, but it is never the same when two people have really made up their minds that they have got to part.”

“But circumstances——”

“Yes, I know.” She hesitated, stopped short, looked at him with lovely distressed eyes because she hardly knew how to frame the words that were trembling on her lips. “Circumstances have been very kind. They stepped in, and everything has come out smooth; but it isn’t quite the same being rich now, and being Lord Moresby. You have come back, but if you had continued to be poor, you never would have come back. And I felt somehow, in some strange mysterious way, that you—you liked me less than money.”

“My dear child, I know what you mean,” he said, with a certain dignity which became him infinitely. “For myself, I have never thought it any sign of love in a man to want to drag the woman he cares about down to abject poverty. You, who have never known what it was, little girl, to live in less style than this house; you who have always had everything that you wanted, according to your station, were out of my reach. At the time Lord Moresby died, I was on the point of chucking the army and trying to find some sort of work to do. But there, what work can a man do who has given the best years of his life, all his training time, to making war? By great good luck, and Lord Moresby’s influ-

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ence, I might have managed to get made Chief Constable somewhere or other. But a Chief Constable who has nothing beside his pay, and is, moreover, over head and ears in debt, is no catch for a girl like you. It wasn't that I loved you less—oh, no; it was that I loved you too much to wish to drag you down. I shouldn't have had the impudence to go to your father and suggest that he should give his consent to our marriage. But now, as you put it a minute ago, circumstances have arranged otherwise for us, and I have brought everything that I have and am, and laid them at your feet. Dear little girl, we'll forget that there has been even the shadow of parting between us; it only was a shadow, after all. The substance is ours, and we must take care not to lose the substance for the shadow. By the bye, what's that?"

"It sounds like my father," said Joan.

"Then," said he, hurriedly, "I'll go and get it over at once."

"Not before dinner?" cried Joan.

"Yes, now, this very minute as ever is. I take it nobody will be more pleased to hear my news than he will."

He caught her in his arms, kissed her passionately, almost roughly, and without another word turned and strode out of the room.

CHAPTER XXII

TEN MINUTES' CHAT

WHEN Robert Delamere saw the man whom he had known as Oswald Mainwaring standing in front of him, he gave vent to an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, my dear Mainwaring, is that really you?"

"How do you do, Mr. Delamere?" said the other, easily. "I hope you are as glad to see me as I am to be back again."

"Certainly, I am very glad indeed. When did you come? Have you left India?"

"Yes, I have left India for good," said Moresby, in a tone of quiet satisfaction. "India and I didn't love each other, and I was very glad when circumstances enabled me to shake the dust of India from off my feet. I would like to have ten minutes' chat with you."

"I'm sure I am delighted. Will you have it now, or will you wait till after dinner?"

"I'll have it now, thank you," said Moresby. "I wanted to consult you on a very important, and to me a very delicate, piece of business."

"Certainly. Come into my own room. I never like to give advice except under proper conditions." He turned up the electric light as he reached the door of his own special sanctum, and motioned to Moresby to go in before him. "You'll have a smoke and a drink?"

LITTLE JOAN

"Thanks, I'll have a cigarette, if you'll give me one—not anything to drink. I—Mr. Delamere, I'm not the same man that I was when you knew me before."

"Really? What has happened to you?"

"My circumstances have entirely changed. If I had been free—free to speak, that is—I should have sought this interview within a month of my first becoming acquainted with your family, but I did not feel free to speak, and therefore I went to India without saying anything."

"I suppose it's Joan," said Mr. Delamere, looking steadily at his visitor.

"Yes, of course it's Joan. It couldn't be anybody else. I'm a wealthy man now, Mr. Delamere; I'm not called Mainwaring any more."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Simply this—that my relative, the Earl of Moresby, died recently, and died not very long after the death of his only son. I've succeeded to everything."

"You mean to say that you are the Earl of Moresby?"

"I am. I hope that won't make me any the less eligible in your eyes as a prospective son-in-law?"

"Well, it depends upon Joan. Of course, if Joan wants to marry you, and you want to marry her, I take it that I have very little to do with the matter. I must say I should object to one of my girls marrying a man who couldn't keep her in at least as much comfort as she has been used to; but that objection being removed, my dear fellow, I shall say 'God bless you both' as heartily

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as I can bring myself to say it to anyone who comes barefacedly to rob me of one of my girls."

"Come, come, Mr. Delamere, you wouldn't like your girls to remain unmarried?"

"No, I suppose no one would wish that. One always wants one's boys, and one's girls too, to marry as one did one's self; but when you take away Joan, you leave me a very lonely old man."

"But you have other daughters."

"Yes, I have other daughters, nice girls and good girls, but there's not one of them just what Joan is. However, I don't want to dwell upon that. You want to marry Joan; Joan wants to marry you. There's nothing more to be said. I suppose all questions of business can be settled later on."

"Oh, yes. I scarcely know how I stand yet. But, all the same, I would like to be married as soon as possible."

"Well, find out first how you stand," said Mr. Delamere, easily. "You see, that's only ordinary care and forethought. I shouldn't like Joan to be in the position of your wife, and perhaps have to turn out without a penny. She must have proper provision and proper settlements, and all that kind of thing. It's early days to talk about the wedding."

"You forget, Mr. Delamere, I have been in love with Joan for two years."

"Yes, I daresay the time has seemed long. I thought you liked her. I wondered a little that you never came to me before."

LITTLE JOAN

"I had nothing to come about. I couldn't come and say, 'I am a pauper, over head and ears in debt, but I love your daughter, and I want her to engage herself to me,' on a perfectly forlorn and probably a fruitless hope. I hadn't impudence enough for that, Mr. Delamere."

"No, no. Well, Lord Moresby, to call you by your new name, which I suppose you have scarcely got used to, we'll talk about that next month, when you do know where you are. For the present, of course you'll dine with us to-night?"

Lord Moresby glanced at the clock, and then looked deprecatingly down his long, lithe person.

"Oh, never mind your clothes," said Mr. Delamere. "You look very nice. I'll warrant Joan thinks so," he added, with a laugh. "You shall come up to my dressing-room and wash your hands. Your clothes will be quite good enough for us."

He clapped his hand on Moresby's shoulder, and gave him a bit of a push towards the room wherein he knew Joan would be. "Come along. I'll just go and speak to the child," he said, forging his own footsteps in the same direction. "Ah, Joan, little woman, so you are going to leave me?"

"Not for a long time, Daddy," said Joan, regardless of the long face that Moresby pulled at the suggestion.

"Not for a long time, eh? To judge by the impatience of this young man here, I should think—well, well, it's all right, little girl. As long as you are happy and satisfied, that's the chief thing. I was happy myself," he

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went on, drawing her close to him and looking down upon her with infinite tenderness, "from the first day to the very last. I wouldn't stand in the way of one of you children for any money. All I want to know is that you shall make up your minds definitely, and be happy."

"I think there is no doubt, sir——" began Moresby.

"No, no, my dear fellow, there is no doubt. It will be all right. You have been proved by a long separation. By the bye, have you been corresponding?"

"No," said Joan, "we haven't corresponded."

"You were left absolutely free?"

"We left each other absolutely free," said Joan.

"Well," said her father, "it's a grand thing when young people remain faithful and true in the face of what looks like the blackest adversity. I hope, my dears, that you'll live many and many a long year after I have gone to finish my love-story in another world, and that you will feel just the same at the end as you do now."

There was an instant's silence. Then Joan, with a sharp little cry, wrenched herself free of her father's embracing arm and ran out of the room.

"Ah, she's a tender-hearted little thing," said he, looking after her. "I've had one or two signs to tell me that our great loss is as fresh to her to-day as it was when it fell upon us. Now, I don't feel like that. I feel she's gone into the next room, and that she cannot come back into this one; but she's there, and she'll be there when my turn comes. Well, now, it's no use looking on the dismal side any more. Come up to my dressing-room."

LITTLE JOAN

Meantime, Joan, with her heart beating and her pulses all on fire, had flown up to her own room. In that sanctuary she shut herself, and, going to the dressing-table, sat down there and looked long and earnestly at herself in the glass. She knew that she ought to be radiantly, brilliantly happy. The great love of her life had come back, no longer poor, no longer embarrassed, no longer a mere soldier, almost a soldier of fortune, but rich and powerful. He had been absolutely faithful to her. His first thought, after fortune had smiled upon him, had been for her. He had not even gone to see the place, not even the town house; he had not made any enquiries; no, he had come straight to lay what he had and what he was at her feet. And yet she regretted the days of poverty. It would have been more to her if he had clung resolutely to her during those dark and hopeless times when it seemed as if the mist of poverty and obscurity would never be lifted from him. He had come back in fair weather, in a blaze of sunlight—the sunlight of prosperity.

She did not come down from her room until the bell rang for dinner, but she found when she reached the morning-room that the news had already spread through the house, and she was seized upon by her two younger sisters, who kissed her and made a great fuss over her, while Moresby stood looking on, the personification of proud possession.

Then Willy came down and added his congratulations to the others. “Dear little Joan,” he said, catching hold

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of her so that she was almost lost in his embrace, "I am so awfully glad that things have come right for you. What, you thought I didn't know? Then, did you think I was blind? Pray, have no illusions on that score. As for you, Moresby, I'm absolutely delighted to have you for my brother-in-law. I believe one ought to give expression to some rot about taking one's sister away, but it *is* rot, and I'm not going to do it. I am delighted that Joan should be going to marry the man of her heart."

And then they went in to dinner, and everybody was very bright and gay, with the exception of little Joan herself. Moresby sat on her right hand, and the pair were very much teased, and finally Mr. Delamere drank their health in a bottle of the best champagne of which his cellar could boast.

And then all went back into the morning-room, and gradually one by one the family effaced itself, until at length Moresby and Joan were left alone together.

"Little girl," said Moresby, as the door closed behind the last of the others to make an excuse for leaving, "there's one awfully jolly feature about being engaged—one isn't expected to want the company of other people; in fact, one's expected not to want it. We don't have to get out of their way; on the contrary, they take care to clear out of ours. It's absolutely delightful. You said just before dinner, little girl, that you hadn't got used to it. I sympathize with you; I haven't got used to any of it, not a bit. But I suppose we shall in time."

"Oh, I suppose so," said Joan. "It's rather pointed,

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though, everybody clearing out of the way like this, isn't it?"

"Delightfully pointed. Now, listen to me. To-morrow I want you to come down the town with me."

"For why?"

"Because I want to buy our fetters. You must have rings. I shan't feel that you really belong to me until I've got you safely handcuffed. And, by the way, I should like to have handcuffs, also."

"What?"

"Yes, I should like you to give me an engagement ring. I don't see why the women should have all the good things of this world, so I must have one, too. By the bye, little girl, what is yours to be?"

"I don't mind," said Joan.

"You don't mind!" he repeated, blankly.

"Did I say that? Oh, I was thinking about something else. I didn't mean it. Of course I mind. I—I think I'd prefer diamonds; they go with everything, don't they?"

"Yes, of course they do. But that needn't stop you having some other rings, just to go on with. I'll come up for you about eleven o'clock. We'll go and see what they've got at Drummonds."

"Very well," said Joan. "And for yours, Ozzie?"

"Mine? Oh, I couldn't wear anything but a plain gold ring. I couldn't wear stones."

"Couldn't you? I wonder, then," he said, hesitatingly, "whether you would like to have a ring that I have? It's a clodagh ring,—a real one."

CHAPTER XXIII

AGGIE'S SUSPICIONS

FOR a whole week Lord Moresby remained at Blankhampton, not showing the smallest sign of desiring to leave the place. Twice his lawyers wrote, saying that it was imperative that he should attend to business matters, and after the second letter, with many grumblings, he betook himself back to London.

"I shan't be many days away. I have no idea of letting these fellows just do what they like with me," he declared to Joan. "And then, little girl, when I come back again, you'll get everything fixed up, won't you?"

"Oh, there's no hurry," said Joan. "We haven't—that is—er—I must have time to get my things."

"My dear little girl, when we are wed you'll have time and opportunity and money to get any quantity of things that happens to suit your fancy. Now, I do beg you'll not keep me waiting a single day on the score of clothes. Anyway, you won't dream of getting more than is necessary here in Blankhampton?"

"Why not? I've worn Blankhampton clothes all my life."

"Yes, my darling; but you are not going to live in Blankhampton now, and you must dress according to the place you are going to live in."

LITTLE JOAN

"Oh, I must get my things in Blankhampton. The people would be heart-broken. Remember, I have lived here all my life. I daresay it's only a poor little provincial place to you, but to me it is my home."

"It has been your home, but it isn't going to be your home any more," he told her. "Still, get your things when and where you like, only get them quickly."

"I must have a reasonable time," said Joan. "I can't hurry out of my home as if I were running away. I must have a decent supply of things. I couldn't be running to the dressmaker a week after we were married."

"No, no, darling; no, no, little girl. It's only that I am so impatient to have you altogether, to make up for the time we have lost. One would almost think," he said, wistfully, "that you were not keen on our marriage."

"Oh, I am, I am," said Joan; "yes, I am. In fact, I agree with you, Ozzie, the sooner it is all over the better."

So he went away, and once, as he pitifully wrote to her, once in the clutches of the lawyers, it seemed as if he would never be free again. And while he was fuming in London a string of horses arrived at the stables that Sir Robert Masters had occupied the previous winter, and a day later Robert Masters himself took up his quarters at the sign of the Golden Swan."

He, too, made his way to Riverside, and Joan almost jumped out of her skin, as the phrase goes, when he entered her presence.

"When did you come?" she asked.

AGGIE'S SUSPICIONS

"I came last night, rather late. Dined in the train, got in at a little before midnight, tumbled into bed, and here I am."

"Have you seen anyone?" said she.

"Well, I've seen one or two people—nobody of any importance. Why?"

"Oh, I didn't know. It's nothing. You would like a cup of tea, wouldn't you, Sir Robert?"

"Well, I would like a cup of tea when it's going, thank you. But, Miss Joan, what's the matter?"

"Matter?" said Joan, faintly.

"Yes. What's happened to you? You look knocked all of a heap. You—has anything untoward taken place?"

"Untoward?" echoed Joan. "Oh, no."

"Well, something. You are different. I don't know what it is." Then he caught sight of the rings blazing upon her left hand. "You—something *has* happened to you," he said, slowly. "Is it true?"

"Yes," said Joan; "it is quite true."

"It's the other man? The fellow in India?"

"Yes."

"And you are—you are engaged to be married?"

"I am engaged to be married," said Joan.

"I see." For a moment he was almost too much stunned to speak.

"I—I—told you," said Joan.

"Yes, I know you did; but you know, Miss Joan, a man never believes anything he doesn't want to believe

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until the knowledge is forced upon him. I didn't want to believe that there was somebody else. I—I—beg your pardon. I haven't said a word to congratulate you. I hope you will be very, very happy. You must forget that I ever had any other idea, and we must be the best of friends, you and I—always."

Joan stretched out her hand to him, but she turned her head away, so that he could not see her face.

"You know," he went on, "I have always thought men such fools when they quarrel with women who don't care to marry them. There's no necessity for anything of the kind, and you can't wonder that some other man has seen and valued what you have seen and valued higher than all the rest of the world."

"I don't think," said Joan, still keeping her head turned away, "I don't think that friendship is possible under some circumstances."

"You mean that you couldn't be a friend of mine? Well, I suppose it is a little impossible. And yet, where one really values another, it seems to me so natural to say, 'Half a loaf is better than no bread.' But in our case it must be as *you* wish, not as I desire."

"As *I* wish," repeated Joan. Then she suddenly turned round and put out both her hands to him. "Yes, yes," she said, "you and I will be friends. There's no reason why we shouldn't. You know, I didn't expect to see you back just yet. I knew you were coming to hunt, but I didn't think you would come for a week or two longer. And all this other business has been so sudden.

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I didn't expect to be engaged. I had no idea that Lord Moresby had a chance of coming in for the title."

"Moresby? You mean Oswald Mainwaring?"

"Yes."

"You are engaged to Oswald Mainwaring?"

"I am."

"You astound me. I had no idea that you even knew him."

"You evidently do," said Joan.

"Yes, I have known Mainwaring for a long time. I never thought of him in connection with you. Oh, no, I mean nothing. Don't think that. I'm surprised, that's all. Is he in Blankhampton?"

"He has been. He's gone to town, and his lawyers have him firmly in their clutches, so he writes me."

"I see." Then Robert Masters looked round. "Miss Joan," he said, "aren't you going to ask me to sit down? Won't you sit down yourself, and let me tell you all that has happened to me since we last met."

"Oh, yes," said Joan; "of course, of course. I'm very stupid. I seem to have taken leave of my wits in these last days."

Robert Masters looked at her sharply. "Yes, yes, it's very natural," he said. "And your people—your father—I hope he is all right?"

"Oh, yes."

"I suppose he's not very cheerful at the prospect of losing you?"

"No, I am afraid not," said Joan. "Of course, he

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likes Lord Moresby very much, but it will be rather a wrench for him. Norah, of course, will have to come home now."

"By the bye, is there anything going on there? You fancied there was."

"That we have yet to learn," said Joan. "She has been awfully close about it; but unless something serious is going on, of course she must come back, because Agnes has no genius for house management, and my father can't be left to the mercy of utter incompetency."

So she talked on, and he talked on, the two making conversation until William arrived with the tea-tray. And then other people came, including the younger girls and several of their boys, and one or two young ladies from the town.

Agnes edged her way to Joan's side when Sir Robert went across the room with a teacup. "I say, Joan, does he know?" she murmured.

"Know what?"

"About Ozzie?"

"Oh, yes."

"Ah, poor chap!"

"Don't!" said Joan, in a sharp whisper.

"Well, of course," whispered the younger sister in reply, "you couldn't marry both of them—at once," she added as an after-thought.

"How can you be so horrid!" said Joan, fiercely.

"Ah, my dear," retorted Agnes, "you are like the picture in *Punch*, where the young Scot's wife upbraided

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the butcher for killing the 'wee bonny bit caught.' 'Why, wuman,' said he, 'ye wudna eat em leeving!'"

She laughed at her own little joke, and went off with a plate of cake to a group on the other side of the room.

Joan was still frowning when Robert Masters found his way back to his own seat.

"What's the matter, Miss Joan?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Really nothing?"

"Really nothing that I need take any notice of. Agnes is too stupid sometimes. I suppose sisters always are."

He said no more then, but went on talking as if no one else was by, and presently he betook himself quietly away, and left Joan free to attend to the many friends who had come for the special purpose of congratulating her on her engagement.

"I think, Agnes," said one young married woman, as she was passing through the hall on her way out of the house, "I think Joan looks dreadfully ill."

"Yes, I think so, too. I quite agree with you."

"Is she happy in this engagement, do you think?"

"I don't know. She hasn't said anything."

"Of course, Mr. Mainwaring practically lived here," remarked the lady, "and we all expected that they would be engaged then."

"They couldn't," said Agnes. "He was over head and ears in debt, and he hadn't twopence. He wouldn't ask my father for her then,—said he hadn't the impudence,—

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but as soon as fortune smiled upon him he came back and laid all that he had at her feet."

"It is very pretty and very romantic," said Mrs. Silverthorn; "but I wish Joan looked a little happier over it."

"Oh, Joan's all right. Don't worry about her. A little bit knocked over. She didn't expect him to come back again. It was all so sudden. Don't worry about her. She'll be all right."

But, although she passed off the enquiry with such a high hand, Agnes Delamere kept her eye very sharply on her sister. She noticed that she seemed to get more fagged and strained looking every moment, until at last she slipped out of the room, and Agnes knew that she had taken refuge in her own chamber.

A quarter of an hour later, when the last of the visitors had disappeared, Agnes, too, went upstairs. She listened a moment outside Joan's door.

Yes, as she had expected, Joan was crying bitterly.

"There's something all wrong here," said Agnes to herself. "Now, I wonder what it is."

CHAPTER XXIV

CONFIRMATION

AN hour or so later, when Joan came down to dinner, Agnes scanned her sharply, scanned her with the keen young eyes of a wholly sympathetic but untried nature. There had never been a love-passage in Agnes Delamere's history. She was a flirt—an arrant flirt. She had a dozen followers whom she called her "boys," and she meted out justice to them with a firm and wholesome hand. She had never cried as she had heard Joan crying an hour ago; not one of all her string of boys had ever had power to bring so much as a single tear to dim the radiance of Agnes Delamere's bright eyes.

"I don't believe in making yourself a slave to a boy," she remarked one day in a burst of confidence to her greatest friend. "Men are curious creatures, my dear. The more you expect of them, the more they are ready to do for you."

"How do you mean?" asked the friend.

"Well, I mean this way. If they think you are watching for them, and that you'll cry your eyes sore if they don't come—well, they'll try it on. If they think if they don't come some other fellow will, and perhaps you'll like the other fellow better, they'll come. That's why I always have so many boys going at a time. Take everything; give nothing. For a hundred words of abject adoration

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give one little meagre one of half-encouragement. Keep them waiting; tramp them under your feet like the dust of the earth; treat them like dogs, and you are all right, and so are they, for they are in their right places. Why, I know a girl—I won't tell you her name, because you know her, too—who was engaged to a man, and she promised to meet him at Bonner's for tea. She waited, if you please, till six o'clock, and he never turned up, and she never had any tea—at least, she wouldn't have had if I hadn't happened to come in. And she looked abject. I could have shaken her," said Agnes, putting her handsome head in the air with a whole-hearted vigour which made her more attractive than ever, "I could have shaken her and then slapped her hard. I told her so."

"What did she say?"

"She said I didn't understand, and that I had never been in love in my life. Said I 'If a man asked me to meet him here for tea, I would have my tea at the time fixed, whether he came to time or not.'"

"But your young man will be in time," said her friend.

"Well, it will be bad for him if he isn't," retorted Agnes.

Now, in this spirit, and with any amount of sympathy, and a certain measure of puzzled curiosity as to Joan's inmost private affairs, Agnes regarded her elder sister with keen, scrutinizing eyes when they met in the dining-room on the evening of the day on which Sir Robert Masters first learned that she was engaged to Lord Moresby.

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They were alone, the two girls, as it happened, because Mr. Delamere and Willy were both dining somewhere in the town. William waited upon them with an indulgent air, and it was not until he had left the room that Agnes ventured to put a direct question to Joan.

"Don't you feel well to-night, Joan?" she asked.

Joan looked up. "No, I don't think I do."

"Headache?"

"Ye-s," she said, half hesitatingly, "my head does ache a little. "I don't feel very bright."

"Do you think you are going to have the flue, dear?"

"No, I don't think so." Joan was intensely interested in the beautiful rings which adorned her left hand.

"I should have a glass of port if I were you," said Agnes.

"Oh, would you? I don't mind."

Agnes took up the decanter, which was opposite to her, and filled Joan's glass. "There's nothing like a glass of port when you feel just as you are feeling now. I should go to bed early. I thought you looked seedy all day."

"Oh, no; I was all right this morning."

"We'll go to bed early. Don't write any letters."

"I must write a letter to-night. I shan't catch the Australian mail if I don't."

"Then I shouldn't write," said Agnes, decidedly.

"I must. I haven't told Norah my news yet."

"You haven't written to Norah? Well, I have—I've told her. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, no. I don't know why I didn't tell her last

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week. I don't know why I missed writing, but I did; and I feel that Norah ought to make arrangements for coming home."

"Norah won't come home."

"You think not?"

"No, I think not. Norah has got fish of her own to fry out there."

"If Norah doesn't come home, of course I can't be married just yet."

"Why not, dear? I've nothing to do but look after Dad. I'm quite as sedate and quite as full of sound common-sense as you are; and, after all, with Cook, who has been here for ever, there is not so much management to do."

"I suppose not. One gets to feel, somehow, that the one who is a couple of years younger than one's self has got a couple of hundred years less sense. It's very unjust. I think you have much more sense than I have, really."

"Oh, I don't know about that. But you mustn't put off your wedding, if you really want to be married, because you think I can't look after Daddy."

"If I *want*. What do you mean by that?" Joan looked up almost sharply.

"I don't mean anything. I suppose you *do* want to be married, since you have engaged yourself to Ozzie Mainwaring?"

"Of course I want to be married. Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, dear, you don't seem too keen on it."

CONFIRMATION

"I hate women who are too keen on being married," said Joan, rather pettishly. "I haven't got used to the idea yet."

"You must be pretty well used to Ozzie Mainwaring by this time."

"Yes; but I haven't got used to his being anything but Ozzie Mainwaring. I don't want to be rushed into it. I—I think being engaged is the best part of the time."

"Oh, that's nonsense. If you really like a man, you can't marry him too soon. Besides, it is so rough on the man to be kept dangling about."

"Is it? It's always rough on the man when you can't do just what he wants. After all, I've waited for Ozzie, and now, if need be, Ozzie must wait for me. I—I feel just so. I couldn't be rushed into it. I must have time to breathe. I must get used to it. It's—it's like tearing one's life up by the roots."

"If I were you," said Agnes, in a dry, sensible tone, "I should drink that port down and I should go to bed. You're not well, you're not looking at all well, and you don't seem well. If I were you I should go to bed and get a long night's rest. By the bye, how are you sleeping?"

"Badly."

"I thought as much. Well, then, look here, I'll mix you up some sulphonal. It's safe, it will do you no harm, and you'll get a solid night's sleep, and in the morning you'll look at everything and think of everything in a

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totally different spirit. As you are to-night, you are nerve-broken, you are unhinged. It isn't like you, dear."

"No, dear, nothing is like me. I never felt so unlike myself in my life. And yet, I don't remember—when Maudie was married—I don't remember that she was like this; I don't remember that she ever had any qualms, that she ever wanted to wait, that she wanted to get used to anything."

"She didn't," put in Agnes. "But then she was so much in love with Billy Blake that she'd have married him the next day if it hadn't been for conventionalities—I mean the next day after they were engaged."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I wouldn't talk about it to-night, Joan," Agnes went on. "Put that glass of port out of sight and come off to bed. I have a note to write,—oh, only to one of the boys,—and then I'll come up and see you take your dose and get comfortably tucked into bed."

Without a word Joan swallowed down the glass of good old port which stood before her, and then, with a half-nervous laugh, she said that Aggie's advice was good and that she would go to bed.

"I'll come up in two minutes," said Agnes. "I just want to write a note."

She saw her sister go up the wide stairs, and then turned into the morning-room. There she sat down at the smart little writing desk and wrote this letter:

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"I particularly want to see you and to have a talk to you. It is most important. If you are free to-morrow morning, you will find me in the Winter Garden, just near Sir Joseph's Statue, at eleven o'clock.

"Yours ever,

"AGNES DELAMERE."

She folded the sheet of paper and put it in the envelope. Then she addressed it to "Sir Robert Masters, Golden Swan, St. Thomas's Street, Blankhampton."

"I don't know that I am right," her thoughts ran, as she took a stamp from the little box where those articles were kept and carefully affixed it to the corner of the envelope, "I don't know, of course, whether I am right or wrong, but I've got no squeamishness in my nature. I'm not going to let dear little Joan put her head into a noose without being quite certain that it will swing her straight into Paradise. If I am wrong, no harm will be done; if I am right, I shall be glad that I took the bold plunge to the last hour of my life."

She rang the bell, and when William came in reply to the summons, she told him to send the letter to the post at once.

"That's all, Miss Agnes?"

"That's all, thank you, William. I don't think Miss Joan's very well to-night. I'm going to get her to bed at once."

"You wouldn't like me to run round for Doctor Parkinson, Miss Agnes?" said William, looking anxiously at

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her. "I've thought Miss Joan was looking very out of sorts, not like herself, for the last day or two."

"I've thought so, too, William," said Agnes. "We can't afford to let anything go wrong with Miss Joan, can we?"

"Not with Miss Joan," said William.

"Yes, I know she's your favourite, William," said Agnes. "But I don't think we'll have the doctor to-night. We'll see how she is in the morning. She will be vexed if we send for him at this hour, making a mountain out of a molehill and a fuss about nothing; but if you would send a cup of coffee and some hot milk up to my room, I'll give her a little sleeping-draught, and to-morrow we shall know better what we are doing."

She went on up the stairs, whither Joan had just preceded her, with a comfortable feeling at her heart that she had taken the matter in hand. "I know what I think," she said to herself, as she reached the top stair. "I may be wrong, but I'll eat my head if I am. Dear mother always said the same thing—half the misery in the world comes from not grasping your nettle. Now, if that is Joan's particular nettle, and she's afraid to grasp it, I have no fear, and I'm going to grasp it for her with a hand of iron."

CHAPTER XXV

A BOLD RESOLVE

WHEN Agnes Delamere arrived at the place of tryst the following morning, she found Sir Robert Masters there before her.

"It's most awfully good of you to have written to me," he said.

"Well, I hope so. I'm not sure about it," said Agnes, rather nervously. "I—I—had to take my courage in both hands, I can assure you, before I did it."

"But why? Surely, Miss Agnes, you know me well enough to be able to say anything you like to me?"

"Well, do I? I am not so sure of that. Look here, where can we talk? I can't talk to you comfortably standing here."

"Oh, no, no. Besides, it's chilly. There's a little kiosk round here, or summer-house. How would that do?"

They turned and walked towards the summer-house in silence together. "Now, Miss Agnes," said Robert Masters, when the girl had seated herself.

"You"—she looked at him with a certain hesitancy—"you'll keep counsel with me?"

"Why, of course."

"You'll never let on to a soul that I wrote to you or came here to meet you?"

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"Of course not. What do you take me for?" he asked.

"Well, I—I am very bold to have come. I may be entirely mistaken, and if I am you must forgive me, and forget that I ever spoke to you on the subject."

"Certainly. But won't you relieve my mind? I'm getting most dreadfully anxious."

"Well, you are a great friend of Joan's, aren't you?"

"I hope I am."

She hesitated again. Then she turned, looked at him for an instant, and immediately averted her eyes. "Sir Robert," she said, "Joan never tells us anything of her private business—that's not her nature. I haven't the least idea whether she's more to you than any other girl, or whether it's only been my fancy, but I used to think, before Ozzie Mainwaring came back again, that you had a special interest in my sister."

"And so I had," he said, quietly.

"Oh, you had? And—er—did you ever ask Joan to marry you?"

"I did."

"And—er—did she refuse you?"

"Well, she did in effect."

"Did you gather that there was anyone else?"

"Yes. She told me, quite frankly, that there was somebody else."

"Did you ever think Joan cared for you?"

"I—I imagined she was not indifferent to me. But then, when one wants something very much, I think it

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is only natural to flatter one's self that one is likely to get it. I was mistaken in your sister, as events have proved."

"How did you think Joan looking?" asked Agnes, abruptly. She no longer averted her eyes, but was scanning him closely and eagerly.

"I thought she was looking dreadfully ill," said Robert Masters, promptly.

"Yes, and you were quite right. She is looking dreadfully ill; and what is a good deal more to the point, Sir Robert, she is dreadfully miserable. Now, look here. I don't know a word from Joan, neither first nor last. I'm going right outside of my legitimate province in coming to you at all; but I never did believe in letting things go from bad to worse just for the sake of speaking. My sister isn't happy."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"No, she's not happy in her engagement to Ozzie Mainwaring. She used to like him. When he was quartered here, they were the greatest of great chums. He was here when dear mother died, and he was awfully nice at that time. And then he went away, and Joan seemed like half a girl. And then you came, Sir Robert, and I began to hope and to think that she was forgetting all about Ozzie Mainwaring. They didn't correspond, mind. She never had a letter from him till one night at Rockborough. You remember, when you went over from Rockborough to Blankhampton one day for a few hours, and you brought back a packet of letters with you that

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Willie had given you for father? It was with those letters, and father gave it to her."

"I remember it," said he, his face changing.

"Do you remember what Joan was like that night? Do you remember what she was like the next day? Just think. Throw your mind back. *I* haven't forgotten, Sir Robert. What do you remember?"

"Miss Agnes," said he, hoarsely, "whatever comes of this, I shall never forget how awfully good of you it was to come frankly and tell me what you believe is the truth. Your sister is the one woman in the world for me. Nothing will ever change me, or make me feel any differently towards her. You may be right, and I don't say that you are not, but, at the same time, I am most awkwardly placed. I'm bound to accept her information, as I am her decision. She says she's engaged to Ozzie Mainwaring, and in my position I can hardly tell her that I believe she's engaged to him but would prefer to marry me. You see how I am placed."

"Do you want to marry Joan?" said Agnes.

"Of course I want to marry Joan. Can you doubt it?"

"Do you think," said Agnes, "that if Joan were engaged to you she would make any and every excuse for putting off her marriage?"

"I hope not." His face took on a look so tender that the heart of Agnes was hardened against Moresby, and she determined in that brief instant to lose no chance of furthering the wishes of the one man and thwarting the desires of the other.

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"Miss Agnes," said Robert Masters, "do you realize what your words imply?"

"I don't quite understand you," said Agnes.

"You imply that your sister is engaged to marry a man for whom she cares nothing,—or, rather, for whom she cares less than she does for—well, it sounds very conceited—but less than she does for me."

"I believe that is so," said Agnes, steadily.

"But what makes you think so? Has she said anything?"

"Not a word. It isn't Joan's way to say anything. She isn't like the rest of us, who blab out everything that comes into our heads almost before it has got there. She's a self-contained girl, and keeps her own counsel. She has never said a word; but if I tell you the truth you'll never betray me?"

"Never."

"Well, as soon as people had gone last night, she bolted upstairs into her bedroom. She had a sort of look like a condemned prisoner on her, and when I went up, just before dinner, she was crying."

"She was crying?"

"Crying fit to break her heart. You could hear her through the door. Why should she cry? Why should she look as she does? This morning I could have sworn, if I hadn't myself given her sulphonal last night—and a good dose at that—that she had never closed her eyes. When my eldest sister was married—Mrs. Billy Blake, who, you know, used to be in the Black Horse—she was

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as happy as a bird, and as merry as the day was long. Joan hasn't a sad disposition; she's a cheerful, contented, equable-minded girl. She's let herself in. She's bound by some sense of honour, and not by her inclinations. It's wicked to marry from a sense of honour. He ought not to keep her to it."

"But if he doesn't know?" said Robert Masters.

"Well, if he doesn't know, of course he's not to blame. The question is, does he know, or doesn't he?"

"No, no. No man would keep a girl to her bargain under those circumstances. And you say she was crying?"

"Sobbing fit to break her heart," said Agnes.

For a moment Robert Masters did not speak. Then he got up and swung out of the little arbour, going with quick, resolute steps to the end of the gravelled pathway which led into one of the main ways of the Winter Garden. Agnes sat there watching him like one fascinated. "He's the man for Joan," her thoughts ran. They took on a curious rhythmical beat that seemed to keep time with his footsteps.

At last he came back again. "Miss Agnes," he said, "I don't think we can decide anything more this morning. You have given me the straight tip—God knows I am thankful and grateful to you; whatever comes of it, I shall be thankful and grateful as long as I live. I'll keep it well in my mind. I think old Bootles must have been before your day, but I knew him well. He had a saying that served him in season and out of season, and

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nine times out of ten it turned up trumps. He used to say: 'Don't worry, old chap. It will all dry straight.' I don't think that you need worry any more, Miss Agnes, about your sister. You have given me the straight tip, and I shall keep my eyes open,—of that you can rest assured. And thank you, and thank you a thousand times!"

The girl parted from him then, going away with a feeling as if she had been betrayed into something indiscreet. She sped away down St. Thomas's Street, made one or two small purchases, saw one or two friends, and so went on home, wondering whether she had done right. Yet, when she came to think it over, she knew that in any case he could have done nothing other than he had done. The conventionalities of decent society had certainly placed him in what he himself described as an extremely awkward and delicate situation. A man nowadays cannot ride a tilt for the favour of a fair lady. No. He has to sit down, and behave in an ordinary manner, as if nothing out of the common had happened, merely taking his chance, as it were, of relief for any situation that may have become strained. Then she consoled herself with the idea that what a man wants badly he will leave no stone unturned to achieve. That Robert Masters did badly want to have Joan for his wife Agnes had not the smallest doubt.

"I can leave it to him," she said to herself. "I have done my best. If nothing comes of it, well, it can't be helped; but I shall have done my best."

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Then she went into the dining-room, where she found Joan just sitting down to lunch.

"My dear, how late you are!" said Joan. "I fancied you were lunching in the town somewhere."

"No, darling, I have been out, but that's all. What have you been doing? Have you a headache?"

"No, I don't think I have a headache," said Joan; and Agnes, looking at her keenly, said within her own heart that, if she were to describe the cause of Joan's sorry looks, she wouldn't ascribe them to the head, but to the heart.

"See anybody you knew when you were out?" Joan asked, presently.

"Oh, one or two people. I saw Sir Robert."

"Oh, did you speak to him?"

"Yes. I saw Flora O'Donnell, too."

"With Sir Robert?"

"No, no. I don't think she knows him. No, she was walking by her lonesome in St. Thomas's Street. For the matter of that, Sir Robert was walking by his lonesome, too."

"I thought he would have been hunting," said Joan, with a fine air of indifference.

"He wasn't. How ill he is looking!"

"Ill! Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do."

"Oh, it seems rather impossible—a man to be ill!"

"Not at all," said Agnes, coolly. "Poor creatures, why shouldn't they be ill as well as us?"

A BOLD RESOLVE

"No reason at all," said Joan, quietly; "no reason. But one doesn't think of a hunting man, somehow, as likely to be ill, that's all. Perhaps he has taken cold."

"I didn't ask him," said Agnes. "By the way, Joan, are you going to Mrs. Mountjoy's this afternoon?"

"I promised I would," said Joan, half-hesitatingly.

"So did I," chimed in Violet.

"I don't think that three of us need go. It's such a crew out of one house, isn't it? I might be let off."

"But didn't Mrs. Mountjoy make a particular point of your coming?" Joan asked.

"Well, she did, rather."

"I'd go, then. She's a dear thing. She's always been awfully kind to us, and if she likes to think that three of us are not too many, I don't see that we need think for her."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DIFFICULTY OF LIFE

MRS. MOUNTJOY was more or less of a character, and was one of the leading lights of Blankhampton society. She lived in a beautiful, roomy, old house, which was tucked away under the shadow of the old Cathedral. New-comers found a good deal of difficulty in locating the exact whereabouts of Parish Court, for it was through an archway in a very insignificant street that the house was approached. Once there, however, everything that could gladden the heart of man or woman in the shape of a house was to be found—a garden centuries old, with cool, green, mossy lawns, quaint terraces, even a few fragments of an aged ruin; long, low, spacious rooms with many windows, wide old doors of solid mahogany that swung back with quite an eighteenth-century air; quaint recesses, long galleries, ingle nooks, all sorts and conditions of things dear to the heart of the modern woman. And Mrs. Mountjoy, who was amply plenished with the world's goods, had furnished her house up to its traditions and loved it as the apple of her eye.

On this particular day the garden was, of course, out of court; but the old house was bright with many lights and the glow of blazing fires, decorated with many palms and flowers, and a gay throng of people had spread them-

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selves over it with an impartiality which betokened that they were enjoying themselves.

When the three Delamere girls were announced, Mrs. Mountjoy was standing in the inner hall receiving her guests. "Ah, my dears," she said, "it's pleasant to see your sweet faces. Come in. You'll find lots of people you know, and Mr. Pagan is just going to do one of his sketches."

With smiles the girls passed on, the two younger ones going straight forward into the large drawing-room; Joan, however, being stopped, just before she reached the doorway, by a good-natured gossip of the town.

"Ah, Joan," she said, "I haven't seen you for a long time. How is the world using you?"

"Very well, thank you, Mrs. Danvers."

"Is that so, now? I hear that you are going to be married."

"I am engaged to be married," said Joan, fencing the direct question instinctively.

"Well, now, I heard so. And I always thought it to be somebody else right until this morning."

"Really? And did you hear this morning that I was engaged?"

"Oh, I heard that a week since. I was coming up every day this week—I was coming up just to talk it over and see what the latest news was."

"That is so kind of you," said Joan, politely.

"Oh, yes, very kind of me. But I am kind."

"Of course you are," said Joan, laughing a little.

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"All the same," Mrs. Danvers went on, "I thought it would be to somebody else; I did, indeed. But it only shows how one may be mistaken. However, it's plain to be seen that you will have another wedding in your family before long."

"Indeed! And who's is that?" Joan asked. Her tone of surprise was a genuine one.

"Why, Agnes, of course."

"Agnes? Oh, I didn't know Agnes was favouring anybody in particular just now."

"Oh, my dear, you keep your eyes shut then. I saw 'em this morning. But, there, it isn't like me to tell tales out of school, is it?"

Joan laughed, for, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Danvers was well known in Blankhampton as being a great hand at tale-telling of all sorts and kinds. The next moment Mrs. Danvers uttered an exclamation almost of triumph.

"Just look into that room," she said, touching Joan on the shoulder, "and tell me there won't be a wedding before long!"

With a smiling face Joan turned and looked into the drawing-room, and she saw Sir Robert Masters standing talking to her sister Agnes, and Agnes looking, I may as well admit it, the very picture of embarrassment.

Oh, the fierce pang that shot through the girl's heart! Then as fiercely she reminded herself that she had now no concern with anything that Sir Robert Masters might chose to do. If he chose to marry Agnes, and Agnes chose to marry him, well, she was engaged to Lord

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Moresby; it was, therefore, absolutely no concern of hers.

It is only in story-books that a woman is able to give vent to her feelings when the great tragedies of life happen to her. Joan was perfectly conscious that Mrs. Danvers was watching her every look, every expression of her face, so she pulled herself together with an iron hand, turning back to her seat with an admirable assumption of carelessness and ease.

"I have never noticed anything between Agnes and Sir Robert," she said, with an air of great simplicity; "but they always do say that onlookers see most of the game. Certainly nothing has been settled; so please don't speak of it until you hear something definite from us."

"Of course not, my dear child. I shouldn't think of it," said Mrs. Danvers, with many nods and becks. "But I always thought it was you, Joan, and I believe it would have been if Oswald Mainwaring hadn't turned up again."

"Oh, nonsense! You do imagine things, Mrs. Danvers. You really and honestly do imagine things," said Joan, with admirable self-control. "And, anyway," she added, "I couldn't marry two of them, could I?"

"Not at once," said Mrs. Danvers.

"Oh, how horrid of you!" cried Joan. "I shall go into the dining-room and see if I can't wash out that dreadful speech in tea."

She turned and went swiftly through the hall and down a corridor to the right, out of which led the dining-

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room. She wanted to forget the look on the faces of both her sister and Robert Masters. Evidently she had been mistaken all along. Oh, no, that was impossible! Robert Masters had asked her to marry him. It was horrible to think that he meant to marry her sister; it was horrible to think a man could transfer his affections so easily, or, if he had not transferred his affections, that her sister should be put off with half a man's heart. It was more horrible because, in that moment of agitation, she put it to herself that of all men in the wide world, Robert Masters was the only one who had any attraction for her. And she was wearing Moresby's diamonds upon her betrothal finger, she was carrying the imprint of Moresby's kisses upon her lips. Life was a dread; the future a horror; the past paradise.

She choked down a cup of tea, much too hot, and turned away from the table. At the door she met her younger sister coming gayly in with one of her favourite cavaliers.

"Violet," she said, "I am going home."

"Oh, Joan!" cried the girl, in a tone of the deepest dismay.

"No, darling, you misunderstand me. I don't want you to go also. I feel a little queer in my head. No, no, you needn't worry about it. I'll go quietly home in a cab and lie down for an hour. You can tell Aggie when you see her."

"But one of us will go with you. I'll go," cried Violet.

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“No, no, dearest, please don’t. You would only make me wretched, and I am all right. It’s only that I feel a little queer in my head, a little swimmy. You understand.” She put up her hand and touched her forehead, as if to show Violet exactly where her malady was located. As a matter of fact, she touched the wrong place. She should have laid her hand upon her throat, where her heart was beating quite out of its right place.

“Let me give you something,” said Violet. “A little brandy——”

“Yes, Miss Delamere, do let me give you a tiny brandy-soda,” said the lad at Violet’s elbow, eagerly.

“No, I couldn’t touch it,” said Joan. “I’d rather go home.”

Then a voice behind her caused her to jump, as the phrase goes, almost out of her skin. “Is anything the matter?”

“Joan’s not feeling well, Sir Robert,” said Violet. “She says her head is most queer. She wants to go home, and she won’t have anything.”

“Nonsense, Miss Joan! You’ll come and have a brandy-and-soda with me. It will do you good. Now, let’s have no demur, no words about it. You are just going to leave her to me, Miss Violet. I understand your sister much better than you do.”

He took Joan authoritatively by the elbow, and piloted her through the crowd into a little room off the dining-room, where the intimates of the house knew divers drinks were to be found. He made her sit down on the

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luxurious window-seat, put a cushion behind her back, swiftly mixed a fairly strong brandy-and-soda, and stood over her while she drank it.

“Now, no nonsense, Miss Joan. Down your throat this is going. Excuse my taking this tone, but you’ve got a face like chalk, and you’re shaking all over. There now; just stay quiet, and don’t talk, don’t worry, and in five minutes you’ll feel a different person. I never believe in letting this sort of thing go curing itself. It’s most dangerous.”

He sat down on the window-seat beside her and coaxed her to drink the rest of the brandy-and-soda. And Joan sat back, feeling not quite sure whether she was going to laugh or to cry; to swoon away, as she had done that day when Oswald Mainwaring came back again; or whether she should turn the whole thing into an elaborate joke.

After a silence of some five minutes or so, when the colour was beginning to come back to her lips again, she looked at him and asked him a question. “Where is Agnes?” she said.

“Miss Agnes? Oh, I spoke to her just now,” said he, looking straight into her eyes. “I passed the time of day, don’t you know, and then I delivered her into the hands of several youngsters from the barracks. She’s all right. Don’t you worry about her.”

“I wasn’t worrying,” said Joan. “I only asked, that was all.”

“You are feeling better,” said he. “The colour’s

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coming back to your lips. What made you turn over like that, I wonder? These rooms are not overheated."

A faint smile curled itself about Joan's lips. "I—I—do get like that sometimes," she said, apologetically. "It's very stupid of me. I always like to get home. I'd do anything rather than make a scene."

"You haven't made a scene."

"I might have done. At such a time one never wants to take anything to stop it; and if I had got myself safely into a cab, it wouldn't have mattered whether I had fainted or not."

"Oh, I don't agree with you. Faints are most dangerous things. You're not well. That's what's the matter with you. You are not as you ought to be. You have no business to look as you look now, not if everything is all right and straight and happy with you. Now, look here, I believe——"

"Don't tell me what you believe," said Joan. "You are entirely mistaken."

CHAPTER XXVII

IF YOU SHOULD CALL ME

WHEN Joan, all in a hurry, said, "You are entirely mistaken," the words were sufficient to pull Sir Robert Masters up with a jerk and to make him shrink into himself.

"I hope you'll forgive me," he said. "I oughtn't to have said that. But you can understand that your interests are very dear to me. I think you are looking dreadfully ill, and you are looking also dreadfully worried. But you are better."

"Yes," said Joan, rather faintly, "I am better. All the same, I think I should be wise to go home."

"No, don't go home yet. You'll frighten your young sisters, and if you take them away when they are enjoying themselves——"

"I don't need to take them away. You should see that they got home all right? Oh, how foolish I am! Why, they have been accustomed to going about in town all their lives; everybody knows them, nobody would harm them for worlds. If I slip away now and get quietly home, you would tell them that I have gone, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I'll tell them, certainly, if you wish it. But I wish you would let me see you home. I'll come back here."

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"I would very much rather take a cab. I don't feel equal to walking."

Robert Masters drew a deep breath. Evidently she was meaning to snub him, put him right into his place, to make him feel that she was the property of another man, and that the possibility of his taking her home in one of the ramshackle old vehicles which they still called cabs in Blankhampton was entirely out of the question.

"Of course, you must do as you like," he said. "Forgive me for being too anxious about you. You'll let me see you into the cab, at least?"

"Oh, yes. You are awfully kind, Sir Robert, awfully kind. I feel so stupid and so silly to be like this. It isn't like me—at least, I don't do it very often."

They slipped away out of the house, and Sir Robert captured a passing cab and helped Joan to get into it.

"You'll tell them I was all right—you won't frighten them?" she said.

"No, no, certainly not."

"Come up to dinner to-night," she said, in a great hurry. "Yes, half-past seven. We shall all be delighted to see you, and I shall be quite myself again."

"May I?" he asked.

"Why, of course. So good-bye for the present. Tell him where to go, won't you?"

He stepped back, gave the order to the man, and stood on the edge of the pavement watching the cab drive away.

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“Now, what the devil is the meaning of that?” he said to himself. “She said I was entirely mistaken. Ah, but was I, was I? Am I? I doubt it. I must be very wary, I must watch. I mustn’t be offended at anything. I must just stand my ground and see how events are going to turn out. If what Agnes said this morning was right, I shall get her if I am patient enough. But it will need a devil of a lot of patience.”

When Joan Delamere found herself driving away from Parish Court in the safe harbourage of a four-wheeled cab alone, pent up nature gave way, and she wept unrestrainedly. As a matter of fact, the girl was thoroughly unnerved and unstrung, and the relief of tears was infinitely grateful to her. She felt as if she had made an utter fool of herself; she felt that she was at what she might consider the cross-roads of her life: the future of herself and several others depended on which of these roads she chose at this moment. If Mrs. Danvers was right, and there was anything going on between Sir Robert and Agnes, it would not do for her to come between them. She felt like the mother of her sisters. She felt, although she was not the eldest daughter, but the middle one of five, that on her depended the whole future of both Agnes and Violet; and if Agnes, with her splendid buoyant health, her superb fund of good spirits, her strong, clear, honest mind, and her wholesome, affectionate heart, had such a chance of happiness as a marriage with Sir Robert would be, it was not for Joan to sacrifice them all to

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her personal fancy. After all, Ozzie Mainwaring, now Lord Moresby, was the love of her life. She must keep that well in front of her. She loved him with her whole soul, her whole nature; this newer growth was a something over which she ought to have kept a tight hand. She had mistaken Ozzie's due thought and care for the future entirely; she had fancied that he was tired of her, that he wanted to be free of his bargain; not because he saw the rocks of poverty and the shoals of difficulty ahead of them, but because he perhaps had seen some other woman. And then the moment prosperity had come, the scales had fallen from her eyes, and she saw that he was as faithful as—well, as she had not been.

Oh, how she hated herself! The tears dried upon her cheeks; she felt ashamed, and she blushed for herself even in the darkness.

By the time the cab turned in at the gates of Riverside, she had lost all desire for tears. She was flushed, and her eyes were glittering, and she was full of a new and stern resolve. She would put all this weakness away from her; she would be everything to Ozzie that he expected and wished and believed her to be. She would do everything she could to throw Sir Robert and Agnes together; she would hold herself with a tight hand, and her heart in a grip of iron. She would let Ozzie fix the wedding-day for what date he chose.

She went straight up to her own room, after telling William that Sir Robert would be with them at dinner,

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and stayed there until it was time to dress for the evening. Then she made quite an elaborate toilet, and as she took a last look in the glass she thought that her appearance was quite brilliant.

"Why, you are quite yourself again," said Sir Robert, when she joined him in the drawing-room.

"Oh, yes. I told you I should be. I went a little queer in my head from the heat or something, that was all. I knew an hour's rest would put me all right again. I believe I quite scared you, Sir Robert."

"You did. You quite scared me."

She was wearing a great diamond star upon the left side of her bodice. It had been given to her by Lord Moresby, and was, indeed, after her engagement ring, the first of her betrothal presents. Somehow that star seemed to fascinate Sir Robert; it seemed as if it put her words away from him. He knew instinctively that it had been given to her by his rival. And so, until the others joined them, they stood talking in stilted and artificial sentences which, if they conveyed much, meant nothing.

It was with quite a sigh of relief that Sir Robert turned to Agnes when she came in in a pretty gown of some soft blue shimmering material which matched her eyes and set off to perfection the brilliancy of her fair colouring. And Joan saw the relief, and her heart died within her.

"You are quite all right now, Joan?" said Agnes, anxiously.

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"Yes, dear, perfectly all right. Please don't say anything to father about it. He does worry so when any of us ail the least thing," she explained to Sir Robert.

"Naturally," said Sir Robert.

Then the others came in, and the subject was changed. What an evening it was. Sir Robert sat between Joan and Agnes, and both of them—I mean both Joan and Sir Robert—were thankful when the dinner came to an end.

Then, when the three men joined the three girls in the drawing-room, he somehow sat down by Agnes, who had promised to show him a new form of Patience. He reflected with grim amusement on the queer way in which the most serious events of life turn. Imagine him, Robert Masters, the mighty hunter, the man who knew not the meaning of the word "boredom," sitting a yard or two away from the woman of his heart, watching a girl to whom he was absolutely indifferent while she inducted him into the mysteries of a feeble and futile game like Patience,—the refuge, as he expressed it in his own thoughts, of lonely old women and the feeble-minded generally.

Then Joan asked Violet to sing something, and Willy, who was playing picquet with his father, looked up and seconded the request. And Violet, who had a pretty little pipe, sang them a song which had just come into her repertoire. Like all very young creatures, she was the most fond of the latest song, and she sang this one with fifty times the amount of expression that she was

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ever able to give to a song with which she had been acquainted for more than a few weeks.

“I think if I were standing,
With half reluctant feet,
Within the misty shadows,
Where earth and heaven meet,
If you should call me softly,
Or breathe one tender prayer,
'Twould win my soul from heaven
To see you standing there.”

Her voice was fresh and young, and she had been well taught,—taught, that is, to sing so that every word had its full effect in the room. Robert Masters kept his eyes fixed upon the game of Patience which was slowly evolving itself from under Agnes's slim white fingers; and Joan—Joan was occupied with the embroidering of an elaborate tea-cloth, so that neither was watching the other.

And Violet sang on:

“I think if life were over,
My parting spirit fled,
The presence of my lover
Would wake me from the dead.
Not all the harps of heaven,
Though sweet their melody,
Could keep my soul one second,
If *you* had need of me!”

It so happened that Joan had never heard the song before, for Violet was still taking singing-lessons, and

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she learned the song with her master. To Joan it seemed as if every word was aimed straight at her—

“Not all the harps of heaven,
Though sweet their melody,
Could keep my soul one second,
If *you* had need of me!”

The singer, in her fresh young voice, again filled the room with the haunting melody:

“If you should stoop to gather,
One violet from my tomb,
And whisper your entreaties
Upon its purple bloom,
I think that I should feel it,
And send it constancy,
So it should live for ever,
In memory of me!”

Somebody gave a sigh when the last notes had died away.

“I don’t know who sighed,” said Agnes, looking round, “but nobody in this room has any need to sigh for a song like that.”

“It was I who sighed, child,” said Mr. Delamere, quietly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DAYS MAY COME

"Genevieve, sweet Genevieve,
The days may come, the days may go."

SO Violet was singing in her fresh young voice a few days after the day of Mrs. Mountjoy's party, as she descended the stairs. She broke off short as she reached the last step.

"Dear me, is that you, Sir Robert?" she said to someone who had just come in.

"Yes. Is anyone in?"

"Joan is in the morning-room. You'll find your own way in, won't you? I'm in a fearful hurry."

"Really? And where are you hurrying off to?" asked Robert Masters, regarding her with immense amusement.

"Singing-lesson," said Violet. "I'm always late. I always arrive panting for breath. I might just as well walk sedately and with dignity, for I never can sing the first quarter of an hour. He doesn't seem to see it, the old man who teaches me. But I must be off! Good-bye! Daresay I shall see you again."

She whisked out of the inner hall and was gone like a flash of light out by the front door. Sir Robert looked after her with a smile, and then, turning, made his way

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to the morning-room, which was situated on the side of the house furthest from the entrance. For once the estimable William was not in evidence, Sir Robert having indeed opened the door and walked in without ringing the bell.

He found Joan alone.

"Oh, is that you, Sir Robert?" she said, looking up.

"Yes."

"Who were you talking to? Did I hear voices just now?" Joan went on.

"I was talking to madcap Violet," said Sir Robert. "She was giving me her views on her singing-master. Well, now, are you better to-day?"

"Yes, I think I am better. My throat is still sore," said Joan, who had not been well for the last few days. "It's awfully good of you to come up and see me."

"Oh, very kind," said Sir Robert, smiling.

"Very kind. Why are you not hunting?"

"The meet's such a long way off," he explained. "It means boxing so far, and if the hounds happen to run the other way, it is such a fagging journey home."

"And this," said Joan, "is the keen hunting man who spends his whole life in sport, arranges everything all the year round for sport! The man who settles himself down in the midst of three packs, so that he may get a run every day; then goes to some highly inconvenient, out-of-the-world spot and fishes. Then hies himself to African scrub, or Indian jungle, or Australian bush for bigger game, to say nothing of what he may

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find between New York City and San Francisco. Oh, Sir Robert Masters!"

"I know," said he, "I know. It only shows how even a hunting man may deteriorate. I met old Mr. Debenham Hardy just now, hobbling off with his valet to service at the Parish."

"Ah, he's making his soul," said Joan. "That's another question altogether. As long as he could sit on a horse, he has been at every meet for the past sixty years. Now he can't sit on a horse, poor old dear, he's making his soul. You haven't got that excuse."

"Well, I don't know. If I'm not making my soul, perhaps I'm doing something quite as important. Anyway, I didn't feel like going out to-day, and I did feel like coming up here. I think I've got a chill, and perhaps you will be kind enough to give me some hot tea presently."

"Presently," said Joan, "yes, you shall have some hot tea and some hot muffin."

By a determined effort on her part, they had got back to exactly the old stand-point. And yet, was it the old stand-point? Not altogether. To all outward seeming they were the best and closest of chums—and yet there was a difference. In the old times, they had never felt at arm's length with one another; now, although she was so gay and friendly with him, he had the continual sensation when in her presence of a barrier having been set up between them.

It was not long before William came in with the tea.

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"Is Miss Agnes at home, William?" said Joan.

"I think not, Miss Joan. I think I saw Miss Agnes go out about half an hour ago. Mrs. Perkyns has just turned in at the gates," he added, in an undertone.

"Oh," said Joan. As William left the room she turned to Sir Robert. "Mrs. Perkyns is one of our afflictions," she said, with a look of dismay. "She doesn't come very often; when she does come, she generally gives us all such a setting down that we keep our places for a long time by a sort of instinct."

"Why do you put up with her?" said Sir Robert.

"I don't know. She's an institution. Father wouldn't like it if we were to snub her so much that we got rid of her, and we never do anything to vex father, if we can help it."

"She is a great friend of his?"

"Not at all. He dislikes her far more than we do. But he and Mr. Perkyns were at school together, and I rather fancy her brothers were with them. Anyway, she's Blankhampton born and bred—the very worst type of Blankhampton."

Then the door opened, and William, with much ceremony, ushered Mrs. Perkyns into the room. Now, Mrs. Perkyns was a woman of singularly aggressive disposition. Her mission in life, her aim and end of existence seemed to be to show other people that she thought very small potatoes of them. She regarded the estimable William with a cold stare of limitless scorn as she passed him by and rustled towards the fireplace,

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the fur-trimmed wings of her outer garment sweeping several small objects off the little tables as she passed.

"How do you do, Joan?" she said, standing like a very large and much-ruffled hen over an extremely sleek swallow. "How do you do, Joan? I heard you were not very well, so Marjorie and I came up to enquire for you. I think you don't ail much."

"Not very much, thank you, Mrs. Perkyns," said Joan. "How do you do, Marjorie?"

"We haven't seen you since your engagement was announced," said Mrs. Perkyns, in somewhat acid tones. "Is this Lord Moresby?"

She knew as well as Joan and Robert Masters himself that it was not Lord Moresby, and Joan knew that she knew. Only Robert Masters himself was in the dark.

"No, Mrs. Perkyns," said Joan, sweetly, "that is not Lord Moresby. You have met him here. You met him the day that he was best man to Billy Blake—Maudie's husband, you know."

"Oh, I did, did I? I meet so many young men, I had forgotten." It was not true, but she uttered the lie without so much as the quiver of an eyelash.

"Let me introduce Sir Robert Masters to you. Mrs. Perkyns—Miss Marjorie Perkyns."

Robert Masters stood up and made a lowly bow, and immediately crossed over to where Marjorie had already seated herself, and sat down beside her. Mrs. Perkyns had ensconced herself upon the couch, and

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pursued her remarks with a brusque, legal air, to which she had given a slightly confidential flavour.

"So you are going to be married, Joan?"

"Yes, Mrs. Perkyns."

"And you are going to be a lady of title. I suppose you won't know any of us now?"

"I shall know everybody that I have known before, Mrs. Perkyns," said Joan.

"Ah, you think so now. You wait till you find everybody calling you 'my lady' on all hands, until you get right away from this, and then Blankhampton won't see much more of you."

"I shall always come and see my father, Mrs. Perkyns."

"You think so now. Well, time will show, time will show. For my part, I don't believe in young girls marrying so much above their station."

"Lord Moresby doesn't think himself above me in station," said Joan, meekly.

"Ah, but he is."

"He used to think it was just the other way," said Joan, "until he was Lord Moresby. Now he only thinks himself just equal to me."

"That is what he says," remarked Mrs. Perkyns, doubtfully. "I never did believe in it. Now, look at little Laura Travers. If you remember, Laura Travers picked up a man in the One-hundred-and-thirteenth Hussars, a big, burly man with a hooked nose and a very big moustache. Do you remember?"

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"Oh, I remember. Laura Travers married Major Barrington."

"Yes. And Laura was so sweet about it. Oh, so sweet—too sweet to last. I don't believe in such glowing promises."

"I don't think I have made any promises, excepting to Lord Moresby," said Joan, quietly.

"No; but you say you are not going to change, and you are not going to get your head swollen. Well, time will show. Have you seen Laura Barrington lately?"

"I saw her the last time I was in London. She didn't strike me as being any different to what she always was."

"Didn't she? Everybody in Blankhampton can't say as much for her,—conceited little upstart. Why, when she came home from India in the middle of June, she went to the gala in a sealskin jacket, and pretended she was cold."

"Perhaps she was."

"A sealskin jacket and muff! The middle of June! And all the other girls in their muslin frocks."

"Yes, but they hadn't just come from India," said Joan. "You'll have some tea, Mrs. Perkyns, won't you?"

"Thank you, yes."

So Joan poured out the tea with a queer little smile quivering about the corners of her mouth. And Sir Robert got up and ministered to them.

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Then Mrs. Perkyns went on afresh. "You are going to be married soon, Joan?"

"We haven't settled the day yet," Joan replied.

"Oh. Take my advice, my dear girl,—you have no mother, now, more's the pity, for a better woman and a better friend never breathed in this world,—take my advice, my dear Joan,—*don't* have a long engagement. There's many a slip, you know, 'twixt the cup and the lip."

"I don't think so," said Joan. "I don't feel like rushing my engagement over in no time. It—it was rather sudden. I didn't know that Mr. Mainwaring had come into the title. I didn't know anything until he came here one day and we were engaged. I have to get used to it a little."

"I must say," said Mrs. Perkyns, dropping her voice to its softest tones, "I must say that you are taking a very curious way of doing it."

"Mrs. Perkyns!"

"A very curious way of doing it. I did hear, yes, I did hear," went on the lady, "that there was a very heavy affair on between you and this gentleman here. All the town was sure that you were going to be Lady Masters before one could say knife, so to speak. I wouldn't let my girls be talked about as you have been talked about, little Joan. I say it in all friendship. I don't want to say one word that I wouldn't wish somebody to say to my own girls under similar circumstances, but I must say that I think you are taking a

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very curious way of getting used to being engaged to another man."

"And I must say," said Joan, very quietly, "that you and Blankhampton are a little out of it for once. He comes here very often," she said, indicating Sir Robert by a movement of her eyelids, "but you should ask Mrs. Danvers to tell you what his attraction in Blankhampton is."

She felt herself a hypocrite, a cheat, almost a liar. And yet, she fiercely reminded herself, it was true. He had cared for her, but now——

"Well, as to that," said Mrs. Perkyns, "I suppose you mean Agnes. Then, in that case, I beg your pardon, Joan. I apologise. Now, I come to think of it, I did see them just turning in the Winter Garden together this morning; and now I come to think of it, it did look like a case."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE DAYS MAY GO

SIR ROBERT MASTERS did not go again to Riverside for three days after the visit of Mrs. Perkyms to Joan. As a matter of fact, on the two days following that afternoon, hunting fixtures were so near to Blankhampton that for very shame he felt compelled to take advantage of them. On the first evening he was dining at the Deanery, and the second at the mess of the cavalry regiment then quartered at Blankhampton. On the third day, just after his return from a stiff day's run, which had not allowed him to get back into town till after five o'clock, he was just coming round from the stables to the hotel when he ran sheer up against Agnes Delamere.

"Ah, Miss Agnes, is that you?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, Sir Robert! Why, where have you been? I've seen nothing of you for days."

"No; I've been doing my duty. Three of the best days I've ever been out in my life. To-morrow I shall stay at home."

"You haven't been near us," said Agnes.

"No, I haven't. I——" And then he told her where he had been. "By the way, Miss Agnes, come into Bonners and have a cup of tea—that is, if you don't mind being seen with me in this disreputable state."

LITTLE JOAN

“Oh, I don’t mind your state at all. But are you sure you ought not to get straight out of those things?”

“No, no. I shall be all right for half an hour. I’m not the least wet.”

So they went together up the street, and turned in at the great confectioner’s shop, which played such an important part in the social scheme of Blankhampton.

“And now,” said he, as he sat down at the table after having ordered tea, “now tell me all the news.”

“Well, there is some news,” said Agnes. “Lord Moresby came down yesterday.”

“Staying with you?”

“Yes. I don’t think Joan exactly intended it, but he arrived bag and baggage, and absolutely declined to go to an hotel, so he had to be taken in.”

“And you think——”

“Exactly what I thought when I first spoke to you on the subject. And, by the bye, Joan told me to tell you if I saw you anywhere about, that she expected you to come up to dinner to-night.”

“That’s awfully kind of her.”

“She said it in such a curious way,” Agnes went on. “Ah, yes, Miss Smith, that’s very nice. I do like cream, you know, and I think you had better give us some more muffins, because Sir Robert is ravenous and is sure to eat all these himself. You like your milk in first, Sir Robert, don’t you?”

“I don’t mind. I don’t know any difference.”

“Oh, there’s a great difference,” she said, as the

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golden-haired young lady who presided over that part of the tea-room went out of hearing, "there's a great difference. Well, as I was saying just now, when Joan told me to tell you that, she said it in such a funny way that I should have known something was up if I had been entirely in the dark up to that moment."

"But she's very happy with Mainwaring."

"You wouldn't think so if you were living in the same house. He is happy; he's proud, and proprietorial, and a little hectoring. Tells us quite plainly that our room is better than our company, and generally behaves as if he had been married to Joan for some years. But Joan I'm less satisfied about than I was when I first spoke to you about her. Have some muffin?"

He was stirring his tea absently round and round, his eyes fixed upon Agnes's charming face. "What did she say?" he asked, as he helped himself from the plate she handed to him.

"She asked me if I was going into the town, and if I would get her a fringe net, medium size, of the darkest brown that I could buy. She said I'd better bring two or three whilst I was about it, which was sensible enough."

"Well?" said he, impatiently.

"Yes, I know. It's dreadful to talk to you about fringe nets, but I want to give you the—the atmosphere of what took place, and I can't give it to you without repeating the entire conversation. Do you see?"

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"I beg your pardon," said he, humbly.

"All right," said Agnes. "Well, she told me about the fringe nets, and then she said I was to come in here and order some sponge cakes and some meringues; and then she said I was to be sure to look in at Clarkson's, the jewellers, and tell them to send for the claret jug that's got something wrong with the hinge. And then she said, in an offhand kind of way, 'Oh, by the bye, Aggie, if you should chance to run across Sir Robert—and I daresay you will—you might just as well tell him to come up to dinner to-night if he has nothing better to do.'"

"Oh," said Sir Robert.

"Yes, I know it sounds very offhand, and she said it in a sort of way as if you were a dog that she was throwing a bone to; but Joan's face and the little tremor in her voice betrayed her entirely. Her colour came and went ever so quickly, and she looked away from me in a guilty kind of way, as if she didn't want me to have any ideas on the subject. I *have* ideas," said Agnes, looking down into her teacup with a very thoughtful air, "and I am more convinced of the truth of what I told you the other day than I was even when I said it."

"Unfortunately," said Sir Robert, "she is committed to Moresby."

"She's committed to Moresby, that's true; but there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip; and if you want Joan, you take my advice, and hang on until

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the wedding-ring is actually on her finger and she is no longer Joan Delamere, but the Countess of Moresby and Ozzie Mainwaring's wife. And, for the love of heaven, Sir Robert, never give me away; for if you do, Ozzie Mainwaring will as surely have my blood—figuratively, if not actually—as you and I are sitting here at this tea-table at this moment.”

He looked up quickly with a swift denial of any betrayal coming from him upon his lips, but Agnes was not looking at him; on the contrary, she was looking straight through the large plate-glass door at the very end of the tea-room which led from the shop into the street. It happened that, in the large tea-room at Bonner's palatial establishment, the tea-room was merely a huge extension of the shop but slightly screened from public gaze,—that is to say, as much public gaze as could be obtained through the single plate-glass door.

“Joan and Ozzie Mainwaring have just gone by,” she said.

“You are sure?”

“Perfectly certain. And what is more, Joan saw us. I caught her face looking full in as she passed. I could only see his tall head beyond hers, and in profile, but Joan looked right in; and Joan looked—oh, I'd rather not say it, Sir Robert.”

“How? What do you mean? Don't keep me in suspense. What did she look like?”

“She didn't look like somebody gazing in through a pane of glass—she looked like somebody fast held in

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prison trying hard to get out. However, you'll come up to dinner to-night at eight o'clock, won't you? Yes, Miss Smith, these muffins are very nice. I'm like Sir Robert, I'm very greedy to-day. Sir Robert, don't you think you had better have some more?"

"No, Miss Agnes, I don't think that I will," he replied, promptly. "But I would like another cup of tea, if you would be so amiable as to pour it out for me."

"Oh, certainly. And then I must make a bolt for home, for I have half a dozen things to do. You must go and get out of those hunting togs, which must be more or less damp."

Ten minutes later they were walking gayly off down the street, and parted almost at the door of the Golden Swan,—parted, indeed, when Agnes went into the jeweller's shop at which she had promised her sister she would call.

Sir Robert, after a tubbing and a smoke and a lounge down to the club to have a look at the papers, hied him to Riverside.

"So glad you could come," said Joan in most conventional tones, when he was announced. "I told Agnes to be sure to ask you if she chanced to see you, and I thought it was very probable she would."

"Well, I haven't seen Miss Agnes for four or five days until this afternoon. I've had a tremendously busy time," he declared: "three stiff days' hunting and three dinner engagements."

"Really? I thought you had deserted us," said Joan,

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with a gay little air which sat but strangely upon her wan face.

"Not the least in the world. You know, Miss Joan, how this place is subject to what I call bursts of social events. Afternoon tea parties, of course, are always with us, but three dinner engagements three nights running is, you will admit, a little out of the ordinary. I was very lucky to persuade Miss Agnes to come and have tea with me at Bonner's this afternoon."

"Yes, she told me—in fact, I saw you."

"Really?"

"Yes, I saw you having tea there. We were down in the town. Ozzie," she said, turning to where Moresby was talking to Willy Delamere, "you remember Sir Robert Masters, don't you?"

"Why, of course, I do," said Moresby, turning round. "How are you, Masters?"

"Thanks, Moresby, I'm all right. I see you have come into your kingdom. It was very sad to hear of poor Kenneth Mainwaring's death—he was a good chap, everybody was very sorry, but it must have made a great difference to you."

"A very great difference," said Moresby, with hearty geniality. "My dear chap, you don't know what it is," he went on, "to be as I was. Many and many a time I have felt if I could only live on my family I should be all right."

"And now you won't feel that any more," said Sir Robert.

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“Oh, no, I suppose, never any more. I used to feel—in fact, I said as much to Joan herself—that if I could only hang on until I got the command I should have lived my life as much as I ever could live it—and after the command, there would be the deluge.”

“And now you have chucked it all, and you are not going to wait for the command at all.”

“Yes, I have chucked it all. I chucked it the moment I knew. There comes a moment in the lives of most soldiers when, if they can chuck, they do. I did; and now all I care about is getting married as quickly as possible, settling down, and doing my duty by the state in every possible way to the end of my life. Oh, yes, it's a humdrum ambition—I know it—but it has advantages that all the glamour of the army cannot give one.”

“I sympathise with you entirely,” said Robert Masters, quietly.

He spoke so quietly that Joan, who was standing near, strained every nerve to listen to what would follow. What followed was that Lord Moresby brought a friendly hand hard down upon the other's shoulder.

“Well, old chap,” he said, speaking in a very low tone so that Joan could only just catch the words, “if all I hear be true, you are not likely to be very long in following my example. And faith, there's not a man in the length and breadth of the land that will as heartily wish you luck as I, who have just shown you the way.”

CHAPTER XXX

NO USE

FOR the life of her Joan Delamere could not resist turning to look at Sir Robert Masters when her *fiancé* so heartily, and yet with the shade of patronage of the newly-engaged man, pointed out the road down which he was expected immediately to travel. Neither man was looking at her, and she saw that Robert Masters drew himself up with the very faintest touch of resentment at the other's familiarity.

"Oh, my dear fellow," he said, "you mustn't believe all you hear. Report has married me at least twenty times in the last ten years, and I am not married yet. Whether I am likely to be in the dim and distant future is altogether another matter. We can leave that until the time arises. Suppose we go into the dining-room and find ourselves a drink."

The two men moved off together, and Joan put up a hand to her head with a curious feeling of supporting herself. As she did so the flash of the diamonds on her finger caught her attention, and she dropped her hand again with a hopeless feeling that she was fairly caught in the toils and that nothing could release her.

It was only a few hours after this that Lord Moresby himself began to press her hard to name the day of their wedding.

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"I find," he said, when he had settled himself comfortably, with his arm about her waist, "I find that my cousin's affairs are not nearly so complicated as they might have been. There are only five people who benefit under his will—his widow, their daughter, myself, and my two sisters."

"He has left your mother nothing?"

"Not a penny. Well, there was no obligation on him to do so. You see, she's married again. To his widow, of course, he left everything that it was possible to leave her, with reversion to her only surviving child; that is natural enough. There are, however, certain heirlooms which he has left to me—I mean to say—I think really I am taking leave of my senses, little girl—I mean to say that there are certain things which he has left to me to be considered as heirlooms. He has left each of my sisters a thousand pounds merely to remember him by. For myself, I have all the entailed property, which is between fifty and sixty thousand a year. I told the lawyers that I was just going to be married, and that I should need to discuss settlements and so on with your father, and that I didn't see any particular obstacles need stand in our way."

"What did the lawyers say?"

"They said it was a great pity that I had not left myself free so as to marry my cousin's daughter."

"I think it is rather a pity," said Joan.

"Oh, yes, my dear child, it is a pity as far as the family goes. It would have kept everything together."

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There's a little estate that my cousin bought many years ago, and that he has left to his wife, with reversion to the daughter. But things fell out differently. I would rather have you for my wife than fifty thousand estates."

"Yes?" said Joan. It flashed into her mind that he had not always thought so; that he had but a very few months back—nay, a very few weeks back—weighed her in the balance against this world's dross, and had decided that he did not love her well enough to face poverty with her. "It does seem a pity from the lawyers' point of view," she ended.

"We haven't got to consider the lawyers' point of view, little girl," said Moresby, "but our own, and only our own—nothing but our own. Now, how soon do you think you could get ready—I mean how soon could you persuade your father to let us be married?"

"Oh, not very soon," said Joan.

"But you want to be married, little girl; don't you? Think of the time we shall have together, you and I, compared with what we have been used to. Money will be absolutely no object to us. We shall be able to go where we like, live as we like, do as we like. And to think that only a few weeks ago you and I were as far apart as the poles themselves."

"So far apart," said Joan, "that I have not got over the feeling of entire separation that had possession of me. Three months ago I—I made up my mind to let you go. I—I find it very difficult to switch myself back

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to the same place that we were in at that time. I—I—you must forgive me, Ozzie. If you had married me when you went to India——”

“My dear child, I couldn’t.”

“No; but if you had, I should have been your abject slave for ever. As it is, I feel that you did not value me so very much. I feel that you are very fond of me, but you are only fond of me second to money, and—and—I haven’t got used to the feeling that you are very rich; not even these rings and things have made me feel that you have more than a half interest in me. You must give me time. Don’t hurry it. Sometime next year—perhaps in a year from now—we will be married, but just now I couldn’t do it; it is quite impossible. I have been through a great deal, although perhaps you would hardly call it so, and you must give me time.”

“If you feel like that,” said he, in a tone that was more than half offended, “we had better put it off indefinitely. But you won’t expect me to be hanging about at Blankhampton? I think I had better go away, and you can send for me when you feel that things can be put into train, and—er—and—er—you *do* begin to feel like—like keeping your vows. As for me, I am no humbug; I never pretend what I don’t feel; and I didn’t feel like dragging you down, trailing you about at the tail of a regiment with a husband over head and ears in debt who couldn’t keep up his own position, let alone the proper position of a wife—I don’t pretend

it. I never did feel like that—I don't feel like it now—but when I came into my kingdom my first thought was of you. I didn't wait to find out anything—I came straight to you. Whatever I have, whatever I may be, I have laid at your feet, and you must do what you like with it. I think I had better go away and see whether, in a few months, you will come back to your old self. You are not your old self now, little girl. There's something about you I don't understand, there's something about you that hurts me every time I look at you."

"You don't care for me," she said. "You only came back from a sense of honour."

"Oh, my God! *I don't care for you! I only came back from a sense of honour!* Are there any men who come back to women they don't care for from a sense of honour? Not this kind of man, that I can assure you. What is it, little girl? Did you truly and really think that I wanted to get out of my—my—well, it wasn't an engagement, but did you think that I wanted our relations to be at an end, that I had grown tired of you? Did you really, truly, honestly think that?"

"Yes," said Joan, "I did come to think that."

"My God, what a blind, blundering fool I must have been! What did I say? What did you do with my letter?"

"Never mind your letter," said Joan.

"Have you got it?"

"Somewhere. That doesn't matter. If you were to

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read it yourself you mightn't feel exactly what it made me feel. How could you? I—I—don't pretend, Ozzie, that I didn't know you loved me—in a way, but I wanted to be loved just for myself, without any thought of money, or horses, or fine jewels, or clothes—I don't care for any of those things. I wanted you to feel as I felt—that if we had to live in one room, love would glorify that room; that if we had to dine off a single dish, love would make that dish taste more sweet than any banquet that ever was spread before a king. But you didn't feel that way, and it hurt. What's the good of my pretending anything else? What's the good of my making believe that I wasn't ready to take you when you were poor Ozzie Mainwaring, over head and ears in debt, not knowing which way to turn; a bad match, an ineligible, a detrimental. When you came to me, the Earl of Moresby, with fifty or sixty thousand a year, you thought I should be ready to lie down at your feet and grovel to you. I—I wasn't. I haven't got over it. I—I—may come round after a time, but I must have time. It was all so sudden—all done in a minute. You didn't give me a word of warning. Why, you know I went down like a log on the floor. I have never been the same since my mother died in that horribly sudden way. It's very hard upon you, but I am as I am. I can't help it."

If he had been less disturbed in mind, more able to regard her as a type than as that most coveted possession the one woman in the world, he would have real-

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ized the truth; and the truth was that she had changed, the truth was that the real love had come too late, or what seemed to her too late.

He was on the point of yielding to her desire that he should go away and leave her to find her soul, as it were, when some curious revulsion of feeling took possession of him, and he held her yet closer to his side.

“No use, little girl,” he said, hoarsely, “it’s no use your asking me to go away, and stay away patiently waiting until you learn by yourself to think of me just as you used to do. I always had to make up your mind for you, I always had to take the lead of you, and I must do so now. I decline to wait. I have your promise; I hold you to it. I will see your father to-night, get all the horrid business details over and done with, and then we will be married. And after that, if you don’t think of me just as I want you to think of me, I must teach you the way, that’s all.”

CHAPTER XXXI

ROBERT DELAMERE'S DOUBTS

THERE is an old proverb which says: "You may take your horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink." And so Lord Moresby found in the case of Joan Delamere. It was a very easy thing for him to tell her that they would get the business details over and be married at once, and that if she did not think of him as he wanted her to think of him, he must teach her the way, and so regard the whole question as finished and settled. Joan could be very obstinate, and occasionally was so.

She freed herself from the jealous clasp of his arm with a curious little gesture which was almost one of disdain.

"We'll talk about it another time, Ozzie," she said, with a dignity which seemed to put him miles away from her. "Not to-night. I am tired."

She moved away from him and went across to the door of the larger room, where the others were all gathered together. Then she looked back at him. Something in his attitude struck her with a feeling that was midway between pity and love. "In any case, Ozzie," she said, "I prefer to go back to the others. When mother was there, it was rather different—there

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was always a centre-pin for the family to revolve round—but now if I leave my father and the others to their own devices, and come in here and they all know that I am spooning with you, I don't think that it is very nice. We'll talk about it another day. Come," she said, holding out her hand to him.

"Joan," he said, still speaking very hoarsely, "you are not really changed to me?"

"Well, I think I am, Ozzie. I'm not the girl I used to be. I have a very tenacious nature, and it seems to me as if I have to get used to any new—— Oh, don't talk about it, please, *please!* It would be much better if you went away and I never saw you again."

"That I can't and won't do," he said. "I shall see your father in the morning."

The result of this conversation was that Lord Moresby followed her into the drawing-room with such a cloud on his face that it was patent to the least interested spectator that something unpleasant had happened between them. With the exception of Mr. Delamere, who was sitting a little apart reading, the others had settled down to some ridiculous round game, and when the engaged couple appeared, Willy Delamere called out to them that there was plenty of room if they cared to join them.

"Yes, yes, we will join you," said Joan.

She drew a chair between Willy and Violet, and Violet pushed her chair away so as to make room for Lord Moresby.

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"Here are your counters," said Willy, handing a little tray to each in which counters had been served out. "Now for a fresh deal."

He took up a pack of cards and began dealing for the first Jack. Agnes, who was sitting next to Sir Robert, turned and whispered something to him.

"Eh? I don't catch it," said Sir Robert, bending his head a little.

"What did I tell you?" said Agnes, dropping her voice and barely breathing the words, so that nobody but him to whom they were spoken could hear. "What did I tell you? Everything's not right there. Look at their two faces."

Sir Robert did not, however, look directly at them, but, on the contrary, kept his eyes fixed upon Agnes. Just at that moment Joan looked up. If only Agnes had known it, she who was so eager for her sister's happiness, she who was so anxious to further Sir Robert's cause, she would have realized that at that very moment she was putting the time still further back, because she was instilling into Joan's mind the feeling that, without doubt, it was not she who was the principal attraction in bringing Sir Robert to Riverside.

Well, the evening went by. Lord Moresby lost seven shillings six pence, and Violet was the triumphant winner of ten shillings, which fairly well explains the rise and fall of the game. And just at the last moment, when the two men were taking leave, Moresby said very quietly to Mr. Delamere that he should be glad if he

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could find him at his office during the course of the morning.

"Yes, certainly. Any time after ten o'clock," replied Mr. Delamere.

The more Lord Moresby thought about the general state of affairs the more certain he was that his only course was to push the marriage along. His feelings at that time were a curious mixture of savageness and softness. At one moment he told himself that it was preposterous that Joan should let herself come to feel the least little bit differently towards him. "After all," his thoughts ran, "I have never thought any differently of her. I cared for her too much to want to drag her down to a life of abject poverty and the misery of trying to keep up a position on nothing, but in my heart I never altered towards her; and although I would have given her up for her own good, the moment that the luck turned she was the one that I wanted to share it with."

Thus he savagely argued to himself. Then the softer side was heard. "After all," he said to himself, "she is not a girl to be taken up and set down like a rag doll. She's worth winning, and, gad, I'll win her! It's a waste of time, of course—it's all been a waste of time. What does the old saw say? 'Faint heart never won fair lady.' Joan is worth winning—too true, too steadfast, too honest to change her mood with every puff of the wind of fortune. I ought to value her the more—and I do."

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It was full of such thoughts as these that he presented himself the following morning at Mr. Delamere's office and got everything put in train for an immediate wedding.

"I think you are hurrying it too much, you know, Moresby," said Joan's father, when he put six weeks ahead as the furthest limit at which the wedding-day might be fixed.

"No, no, sir. Saving your presence as a man of law yourself, I know what lawyers are, and I have told Tharples and Busby that for once they must do things with what they are pleased to call indecent haste. I don't in the least mind abuse, but, saving your presence, if I leave it to them it will be six years instead of six weeks before my wedding can come off. I have wasted time enough, Mr. Delamere; I don't want to waste a day more than is absolutely necessary. So if you would send up and see Tharples and Busby, and would make them feel that I really am in earnest about this matter, you would be doing both them and me an inestimable service. I shouldn't like to change the lawyers who have had the Moresby affairs in hand for the past fifty years, but I certainly shall if they don't bestir themselves in this particular instance."

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Delamere, "it's perfectly natural. I sympathize with you entirely. What I don't quite understand is that Joan herself talks about a year's engagement."

"Ah," said Moresby, with an air of seeming ease

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and with an assurance which astonished even himself, "that's Joan's way of trying to spare your feelings. Joan is so extraordinarily tender-hearted. She can't bear to think of what will happen to you when I have taken her away. Now, in a sense, Mr. Delamere, I don't want to take her away at all. Because she's marrying me, there's no reason why she should be separated—I mean really separated from her own people."

"We cannot shut our eyes to the fact," said Mr. Delamere, "that you are the Earl of Moresby, and that the Countess of Moresby and Joan Delamere are two very widely different persons. The day that Joan becomes your wife, she will have the duties of your station to think of before her natural affections for her own people. You have your family to think of, your position, your relations, your tenants to care for, your place to fill, and if Joan is to be a good wife to you—and I could not conceive of her marrying anybody to whom she was not a good wife—her duties will entirely swamp all the life that she has lived up to now."

"I don't see it, Mr. Delamere—I can't see it. I have no duties more important than my duty to my wife will be, and my wife can have no affections which will swamp her love for her own people. As to her being Countess of Moresby, we shall both be very new at the game. I have been a poor relation all my life, a hanger-on as much as I would be. I was educated by the late lord, educated because he felt that I might come into the title one day, and he wouldn't care that the next Lord

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Moresby should have been educated anywhere than at Eton; otherwise I think my relationship to the Moresby family was an absolute detriment to me. Until I succeeded to my cousin's place I never went there; they didn't like me—they gave me no opportunity of liking them. As for the tenantry, my wife's relations can have nothing to do with my tenants. My place in the world is the place that I have made for myself in the years that have gone by, not the place that is going to be mine from now on. At all events, I mean to have everything put in train so that my marriage can take place as soon as Joan consents to it."

For some minutes after Lord Moresby had left the office Robert Delamere sat buried in thought at his great desk. It had just dawned upon him that there was a screw loose somewhere between those two.

"He wants to be married right off, Joan wants to wait a year. I don't understand that. It is against nature for a boy and girl who love each other to wait a year when they have an income of fifty or sixty thousand. Can't make it out. The question is, what can I do? Well, practically, I can do nothing. That's where a man is so handicapped. If Margaret had been here, she would have known in a moment—in a moment. Well, I suppose I must do what he wants, and leave it to Joan's own common sense that she will do nothing foolish in what concerns the most important step of her life."

CHAPTER XXXII

PLENTY OF TIME

NOW, it happened that while most people in Blankhampton knew the exact ins and outs of the history of the Delameres as a family, many men who were quartered in the garrison and many others who were only to be regarded as birds of passage in the old city had not the least idea that a certain curious old passage, leading between two houses a little way past the Golden Swan, was called Delamere Court. But Delamere Court was, as I have explained earlier in this story, the cradle of the family, and it was here in the quaint, old-fashioned house that Robert Delamere received Lord Moresby when he came to make a very determined effort to hurry on his marriage as quickly as possible.

But there was one bird of passage in Blankhampton who knew all about Delamere Court, and who saw Moresby come out looking very happy and contented with himself, and, taking a turn to the right, go rapidly up the street in the direction of the club. And that bird of passage was Robert Masters.

“Moresby, by Jove!” his thoughts ran. “Been interviewing Delamere himself. Well, I suppose it’s all up. I don’t feel that it would become me to try and force any confession out of Joan other than such as she seems

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to wish me to accept. She doesn't care for him—Agnes is perfectly right. Yet what can I do——?”

His thoughts had gone thus far when he ran, literally ran, against Agnes herself.

“Dear me, Sir Robert, your wits are wool-gathering!” she said. “You almost knocked me down.”

“I am so sorry, Miss Agnes,” he exclaimed, penitently. “I was going along in a brown study—it's an awfully bad habit—do forgive me.”

“Oh, yes, there's nothing to forgive,” said Agnes, good-naturedly. “Where are you going?”

“I'm quite at a loose end,” said Sir Robert. “May I put the same question to you?”

“Oh, certainly. I'm out on the gad to see what I can see. I came out of a shop over there and I saw Ozzie Mainwaring just turning out of the entrance to the office. That was why I came this way.”

“Let's turn back and walk that way, then,” said Sir Robert. “I, too, saw Moresby come out of your father's office. I suppose he's been——”

“I suppose so,” said Agnes in disgusted accents. “He means to force it along anyway.”

“Of course he does. I should myself under similar circumstances.” It was characteristic of Sir Robert that he had any amount of sympathy with the man who had won the promise of the woman that he wanted to have for his own more than any other woman in the world. “Things are working to a head, Miss Agnes,” he said, as they turned and went up the street together. His

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tone was off-hand, don't-care-ish, and a casual observer might have been forgiven for believing that he took no interest in Joan whatever.

"Oh, yes, he means to have his own way; but, all the same, Joan means to have hers. Joan told my father at breakfast this morning that she did not mean to be married for a year, and when Joan makes up her mind, it's a very clever man or woman than can induce her to change it."

"It would be a very bold man," said Sir Robert, "who in the present circumstances would broach the subject to her."

"Perhaps," said Agnes. "I don't stand in that awe of Joan myself. I tell her what I think, and I shall continue to do so."

"You haven't told her that I——"

"No, I haven't mentioned you—oh, I have mentioned you casually, of course. I've generally remarked it in a careless kind of way when I happen to have seen you, but as to drawing Joan into a discussion about you—well, Joan never seems to me to be taking any."

Sir Robert gave vent to a short laugh. He was so much in love with Joan that he admired even those qualities which made her difficult of approach. They had by that time walked until they were clear of St. Thomas's Street, and by a sort of tacit consent they strolled on across the Parish Place and into the western entrance of the Winter Gardens. It happened that very moment, as they crossed the road and disappeared

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within the gates of that Elysium of young people who inhabit the old cathedral city, that Joan herself looked forth from the window of her dressmaker's waiting-room, which happened to command an excellent view of both road and gateway. So for herself she saw Agnes, tall, erect, winsome, and *distinguée*, go sauntering along with the man whom she had refused to marry—whom she had reluctantly refused to marry.

She sat down on the nearest chair, feeling quite sick and nervous. So it was true, after all. Oh, there was no mistaking the way in which the girl looked up at him, the way in which the man looked down upon the girl, the slow, dawdling, interested walk. Nay, she even knew by a sort of instinct that they would take that turn to the left, just as they reached that part of the Winter Garden, where two paths met, along which, from her coign of vantage, she could see no further. Yes, they were going to the left, and to the left was the little kiosk which had given shelter to one generation after another of Blankhampton lovers.

She turned her head as the dressmaker came into the room, with a sick and angry throb at her heart.

"I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Delamere. I really couldn't help myself, although you had an appointment. Lady Brookes was here, and I couldn't get her quite finished off. Your dress is ready, if you will come into the next room."

And so for nearly an hour Joan stood there while the dressmaker pinched and tweaked and pulled and pinned,

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and smoothed with keen professional fingers this way and that, babbling of fashions the while. "A lovely trousseau, Miss Delamere," she remarked during the process of the fitting, "and Lady Brookes is most particular about it. Every single thing is being made in Blankhampton. We are even doing the wedding-dress."

"Ah, yes, Miss Brookes is going to be married," said Joan, "yes. It's a nice wedding, isn't it?"

"I think so. The gentleman came here with her one day. He's in the Life Guards—very particular about everything. Insists upon her having a great deal of white; says they'll expect it in London in a bride."

"I suppose so," said Joan.

"I hope you'll give me plenty of time, Miss Delamere, when you're getting your things—that is, if you honour me."

"Yes, I'm going to have my things made here when I am married," said Joan; "most of them."

"I did hear," said Miss Mercer, "I did hear that——"

"Not just yet," said Joan, breaking in ruthlessly. "I'll give you plenty of time."

"Miss Brookes has only been engaged three weeks."

"Ah, yes. I'm going to be engaged longer than that. I think, Miss Mercer, that sleeve is a little tight."

There was something in the girl's tone which stopped the dressmaker's babbling at the fountain-head. "My dear," she remarked to her sister, half an hour later, when Joan had departed, "there's a mystery there. Blazing diamonds, as big as marrowfat peas—loads of

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them on both her hands. He was here the other day with her—you remember Mr. Mainwaring, young, good-looking, big, with a devil-may-care way with him? Everything you would think could possibly attract a girl. She doesn't care two pins for him, Jemima. No, she says, quite sharp-like, 'I'm going to have a long engagement.' Not the least interested in Miss Brookes's things. Didn't ask a single question. I showed her that beautiful pastel blue *crêpe de chine* dress we are making off the Worth's model. Not the least interested—said she thought it looked drabby. The pastel blue, mark you, Jemima!"

"And I don't know that I don't think her right," said Jemima, coolly. "Miss Delamere has very good taste in dress; you have always said as much yourself, Janie."

Meantime, Joan was walking quietly down the street in the direction of home. As she turned the corner leading into St. Thomas's Street, Moresby, who happened to be standing in one of the windows of the club, caught sight of her and promptly gave chase.

"I had no idea you were coming to town this morning, Joan," he said, as he joined her. "I was just coming up to ask you to give me some lunch."

"Oh, certainly," said Joan. "I don't call this coming to town. I have only been to the dressmaker's."

"Oh, I see."

They walked down the whole length of St. Thomas's Street, I need hardly say the observed of all observers.

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Once or twice he drew her attention to something in a window as they passed, and when they reached the big jeweller's shop he would fain have gone in and spent some money upon her. But Joan was firm.

"Don't buy me anything to-day," she said, almost vexedly, as they turned away from the window. "I have more things than I can wear."

"Dear little girl," said he, "you don't know the pleasure it is to be able to buy you things."

"Well," said Joan, "you will have the particular pleasure of providing me with everything for the rest of my life. You'll very soon find that pleasure wear out."

It was the first time since their engagement that she had voluntarily spoken of the future, and Moresby felt a glow at his heart in consequence. As they reached the end of the street, he suggested that they should go home by way of the river, and as Joan straightway acquiesced they turned aside from the crowded highway into the greater seclusion of the almost deserted walk. It was there that Moresby told her that he had seen her father, that all business matters would be satisfactorily arranged within a few weeks, and that so far as such things were concerned the way was now clear for them to be married as soon as they chose. The girl said nothing until he had, in quite a glow of imagination, drawn a picture of the good time that they were going to have together. As they reached the lower gate of the Riverside garden, he drew her into what had once been their favourite haunt.

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"Come in here, little girl," he said, "where you and I used to spend so much of our time when life was all hopeless, the future all black and dreary, when there didn't seem to be a ray of sunlight from one end of life to the other. And here, where we loved each other in spite of everything, tell me that you love me still and that you will give yourself to me before many weeks are gone by."

In a sense he had always found her difficult, he had always noticed that Joan would not be bidden to take any one course.

"If you really feel sure," she said, looking straight up at him and making no declaration of her own feelings, "if you really feel quite sure that you want me, and you will be happier for having me for your wife, then, Ozzie, we can be married as soon as you like."

CHAPTER XXXIII

DAVID MOLYNEUX

BUT even then the way was not quite clear for the marriage of Lord Moresby and little Joan. There was yet another person to reckon with—Joan's father. During the whole of that day a conviction had steadily borne itself in upon his mind that there was, as his first expression had put it, a screw loose with little Joan. By the time he arrived home—half an hour or so before dinner—the conviction had become confirmed. Joan's wan and strained appearance when they met at the dinner-table was enough to convince him that, whatever course he took, he must be firm in one particular, which was that Joan should have ample time in which to reflect upon the seriousness of the step which she was thinking of taking.

It happened that night that Lord Moresby had gone to dine at the cavalry mess, and so indeed had Sir Robert Masters. Willy Delamere was going with Agnes and Violet to a small dance a few doors away. Joan, having declined the invitation, remained alone with her father.

"Would you like to play a game of cribbage, dear?" she asked, when the young people had departed.

"Yes, I should rather," he returned.

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So Joan got out the table and the cards, and adjusted a movable electric lamp, so that her father could play his evening game in comfort.

"By the bye," said he, presently, between the deals, "Moresby came in to see me this morning."

"H'm?" Her tone showed that she heard; it betrayed no curiosity or desire for further information.

"He seems to think he can get settled up in next to no time now," Mr. Delamere went on. "He wants to be married in a few weeks."

"You think the affairs will get settled?"

"No, not so soon as that. Lawyers never hurry themselves, not even for other lawyers. Why should they? At all events, they never do and never will. Will you be very disappointed if things cannot be arranged as soon as he hopes?"

"No," said Joan, "I am in no hurry."

"He is," said Mr. Delamere.

"Yes, Ozzie is. I suppose it's natural," Joan replied, dealing the cards with great care. "Your cut, Dad—two for his heels."

"Yes, it's a perfectly natural thing that Moresby should be in a hurry, and it's an equally natural thing that I should object to any hurry which will allow you to be married without due care being taken of your future. You won't think me hard or anything of that kind, but this settlement must be made before you will be married with my consent?"

"I shall never think you anything that's not dear

and good and true, Daddy," said Joan, quietly. "And if Ozzie's lawyers don't get through, well Ozzie must wait a little while, that's all."

And then they went on playing the game, and Mr. Delamere knew that he had struck the right note, that there was a screw loose, and that for some inexplicable reason Joan was not as keen on the marriage as her *fiancé* was. And so they played the homely game for all it was worth, and not again did they mention the subject upon which he had so lightly touched.

Meantime, Willy and the two girls had arrived at the house where the dance was being given. It was a pleasant house, a little further out of the town than Riverside. The hostess was a young married woman whose husband was second in command of the cavalry regiment then occupying the barracks, and naturally enough the Colonel, with the officers and other guests, arrived a little after ten o'clock, having, indeed, made a move as soon as dinner was over.

Now, it happened that among the first of the dinner guests to appear was Sir Robert Masters, who straightway made for Agnes Delamere and asked her to honour him with a dance. All the Delameres danced to perfection—it was quite a gift of the family in all its branches.

"Where's your sister?" he asked.

"Oh, Joan hasn't come."

"But why?"

"I don't know. She doesn't care very much for

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dancing, you know. At all events, she wouldn't come with us to-night. I left her playing cribbage with my father."

"Oh. What will Moresby say to that, I wonder?"

"I don't know. There he is!" said Agnes. And indeed at that very moment Lord Moresby's handsome face was to be seen in the doorway. He looked round here and there, evidently on the search for some particular person. Then he, too, came across the room towards them, but on the way he stopped, and they saw him speak to Violet, who answered with a laugh and a nod.

Then he came on to Agnes. "You'll give me a couple of dances, of course," he remarked, as he reached her side.

"Oh, yes, certainly."

He marked her programme, and then, looking round, said: "By the bye, where's Joan?"

"Joan hasn't come."

"Really? She's not ill?"

"Oh, no. Didn't you know she wasn't coming?"

"No."

"Oh," said Agnes, rather taken aback, "I don't think she had any intention of coming."

"Well, to tell you the truth," said he, "we never mentioned the dance one way or another."

Then the music began, and the next moment Sir Robert and Agnes floated away together.

"By the bye, Miss Agnes," said Sir Robert, "there's

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a man here who is awfully anxious to be introduced to you."

"Introduce him, then," said Agnes,—“that is, if he is all right.”

So Robert Masters turned round and nodded to a young man who was standing a yard or two away. “Let me introduce Mr. Molyneux, Miss Delamere—Miss Agnes Delamere,” he said, turning to the young man.

Then Mr. Molyneux, who was a long and lithe young man in uniform, brought his heels together with a click and made Agnes a very deferential bow. In an equally deferential way he asked if he might have the honour of a dance, and Agnes, with one glance into his cool grey eyes, replied that he might certainly; whereupon Mr. Molyneux immediately helped himself to two. He was young, with killing grey eyes and a debonnair manner, not exactly good-looking. The face was swarthy, the hair very black and close-cropped. He danced to perfection, an accomplishment not always to be found in wearers of uniform, and before a quarter of an hour had gone by he had persuaded Agnes to discard her programme and to give him all the dances that were left.

“Why,” he argued, when she had made some small pretence of demurring to this arrangement, “why, when two people meet and they find their steps suit like—like—oh, twin halves of a soul, don’t you know, or—er—a broken sixpence, or—er—or any of the other tests of that kind, they should go and bore themselves

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by dancing with other people, whom the man has to lug round or whom the girl has to provide ball-room for, is beyond me. Now, that chap you were dancing with last—I mean when I was watching you just now, a little blonde chap—every turn he took he trod on your toes.”

“Yes, he did,” said Agnes, ruefully.

“And alternated with that every other step he took he kind of pinched you with his knee. You looked the picture of abject misery.”

“Did I?”

“Oh, you did. And he was such an ass that he hadn’t the least idea that he wasn’t absolutely acceptable to you. But really, I beg your pardon—he may have been your brother for anything I know.”

“Well, he is not my brother, as a matter of fact.”

“Still worse, he might be your *fiancé*,” said Mr. Molyneux, with a fine air of bringing it out at last. “I apologize. I—I made a great slip. I really apologize.”

“All right,” said Agnes. “You needn’t apologize any more, thank you. I never saw the creature before to-night, and he was one of the most martyr-making persons I ever came across.”

“A martyr-making person? That’s a good phrase,” said Molyneux. “There, there, it has come to an end! All good things do. Come and have an ice, Miss Delamere.”

Well, the result of that evening was that the following afternoon saw Mr. David Molyneux comfortably

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ensconced in the most comfortable cosy-corner of the Riverside drawing-room. From the beginning he was quite at home and friendly, called the girls "Miss Joan," "Miss Violet," and "Miss Agnes," and after an incredibly short time remarked that it seemed a waste of time and friendship to submit to ordinary conventions and formalities, and added that people who knew him for a week always called him David, and that they might as well begin as they would certainly end. Having intimated this much, he forgot to give Agnes any prefix to her name, apologised profusely, and called her Agnes from that moment.

I don't know that at any ordinary time his unabashed impudence would have gone down with the family at Riverside, but the gloom upon the house, owing to the tragedy that was in process of happening, was so heavy that this gay and light-hearted subaltern came like a veritable ray of sunshine and was welcomed accordingly. It transpired that he was a young man of many accomplishments—the finest steeplechase rider in his regiment, owed two at St. Andrews for golf, was a particular hand at fly-making and at fly-throwing, could play on a penny whistle, and could vamp an accompaniment on the piano to any song in any key. He had also several minor accomplishments, including a queer collection of stories, a set of French picture puzzles, several ingenious tricks performed by the aid of a box of matches, and he could imitate all sorts of weird sounds with no other aid than his mouth and his fingers.

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“A most entertaining person,” said Violet to the general company, when he had at last reluctantly betaken himself away after having invited himself to come again in the most open-hearted and artless manner, “a most entertaining person.”

“You find him so?” said Moresby.

It was the first time that Moresby had ever spoken to one of the Delameres in that tone.

“Yes, I do, Ozzie,” said Violet in a tone of absolute severity. “I find him *most* entertaining. I suppose he isn’t worth twopence—men who are amusing never are. There was a day, my dear boy, when you were the most enlivening creature that one ever looked out for like Sister Anne from her watch-tower.”

“I hope you never looked out for me like that,” said Moresby, with almost a sneer.

“Never—at least, we did once, or something like it in the old days when you were poor and nice. But now if any Sister Anne at Riverside looks out for you, it will be much more like the Sister Anne of tradition looking out for——”

“Thank you,” said Moresby, pointedly.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A DUMPING-GROUND

“THIS house,” said Lord Moresby, a week later than the little dance at which David Molyneux was introduced into the Delamere family, “this house seems to me to be the dumping-ground for all the idle young men in Christendom.”

His tone was one of intensest annoyance, and was in answer to a remark made by Joan Delamere that an imperative summons at the door which was sounded through the house at that moment was David Molyneux’s knock. As a matter of fact, it was not that estimable and shameless young man, who had long ago given up knocking at the door of Riverside and turned the handle, explaining to the faithful William that he hated giving unnecessary trouble, a remark which caused that worthy and punctilious servant to precede the young gentleman to the drawing-room with a broad grin on his respectable countenance. No, it was not gay and debonnair David Molyneux who was at that moment battering at the principal entrance of Riverside, it was that old friend of the family, Mrs. Perkyns, accompanied by a maiden sister of uncertain age.

It was the faithful William who broke the news to Joan as she sat in a corner of the big sofa in the morn-

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ing-room. "Mrs. Perkyns, Miss Joan. In the drawing-room."

"Is anybody there, William?" asked Joan.

"No, Miss Joan."

"Are the young ladies in?"

"They are *in*, Miss Joan," said William, with a slight emphasis on the word which indicated that they were not out, "but they don't seem much inclined to go into the drawing-room."

"Oh," said Joan in a comprehensive tone. "Is anybody with them?"

"Yes, Miss Joan, there are two or three young gentlemen in the library. Miss Violet recommended me to say that I had made a mistake, and that nobody was at home."

"Oh, William! Not for the world. I'll go. Let's have tea at once."

"Why should you be sacrificed?" said Moresby, as the door closed behind the servant.

"Well, why shouldn't I? They've got their boys there, and they are happy and enjoying themselves, and young."

"*You* are happy, *you* are enjoying yourself, *you* are young—or you ought to be," said he, vexedly, for he was beginning to feel that some strange wall of ice had imperceptibly arisen between him and her.

"Oh, it's not that. I see so much of you—we are legitimately left alone because of our engagement to one another—and you know what a bore Mrs. Perkyns

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is. She was very fond of poor mother, and mother couldn't bear her, but she was so kind-hearted she never would let her know it."

"Oh, your mother was too good a saint to live," said Moresby, "and you are reaping the benefit of it, my dear."

"I shan't reap the benefit of it very long," said Joan. "I shall be going away after a little while, and then Agnes, poor child, will have to put up with Mrs. Perkyngs all the rest of her life, unless she happens to marry out of Blankhampton."

"Well, if she marries Masters, she won't, of course, be in Blankhampton."

"You think she will?" said Joan, as she crossed the room.

"I think it is not unlikely. Everybody seems to expect it. He's always hanging about the place; they seem as thick as thieves."

"Will you come with me, or will you come in presently?" said Joan, as she laid her hand upon the handle of the door.

"If you don't mind, I'll stay here and have a cigarette. I can't stand that old woman. She so common, so pushing, so inquisitive."

"Won't you go to the others?"

"No, I'd rather stay here alone, if you don't mind."

So Moresby, after he had closed the door behind his *fiancée*, went back to the big sofa and sat down to smoke in peace, while Joan, ever the one of the Delamere

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household to be sacrificed in the cause of others, went with a sigh and something like a choke in her throat to face the ordeal of giving tea to Mrs. Perkyns. It was with a throb of absolute relief that she saw the maiden sister.

“How do you do, Mrs. Perkyns? And how are you, Miss Maria? When did you come to Blankhampton?”

“Maria has been here three days,” said Mrs. Perkyns. “I should like her to come and live with me altogether. It would be great companionship for me, and would relieve me of a great deal of the necessary chaperonage of my daughters; but Maria is extremely obstinate—she prefers what she chooses to call her liberty.”

“My dear Joan,” said Miss Maria, “I have had a very hard life, because I was the only one left in the home nest to attend on a very aged and ailing mother. I did my duty to my mother to the last moment of her life. I sacrificed my whole girlhood, I never went to a dance, I never had any gaiety; I spent my days in very slow drives, dawdling walks, small home-conducted charities, and I ruined my voice by reading aloud. I kept up a correspondence with all the members of an extremely large family—and all very good correspondents—and I entirely managed the servants and the household. Now that dear mother has been called to a higher sphere, I am going to live my own life in my own way.”

“I think you are very wise,” said Joan. “And after

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a little time very likely you will make up your mind to marry somebody."

"If I meet somebody who wants to marry me—which at my time of life isn't very probable," said Miss Maria, "I shall certainly marry him. I shall not consider the claims of my many nieces and nephews, and I shall not consider the wishes of my sisters, who one and all want me to continue the life of slavery in which my days have hitherto been passed. I have eight hundred a year, I have a house that I am extremely fond of, the society around is pleasant and neighbourly, and I don't care a dump for anybody. I admit, Charlotte dear, that it is hard upon you to feel that you have got a sister who ought to be your slave, but—I'm going to retain my liberty."

"I think you are very wise, Miss Maria," said Joan.

"Do you indeed, Joan?" said Mrs. Perkyns. "Well, if all we hear be true, my dear girl, you are not too competent to arrange the lives of other people."

"I don't understand you, Mrs. Perkyns," said Joan. She was thoroughly taken aback by the onslaught, and a faint pink colour, which was the signal-flag of resentment, rose up in her olive cheeks.

"It's against nature," said Mrs. Perkyns, "for a girl who is engaged to a nobleman—young, good-looking, rich, and obviously devoted—to have a year's engagement."

"I quite agree with you," said Joan.

"Eh?" It was then Mrs. Perkyns's place to feel

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somewhat taken aback. "Then, why are you having it?" she added, all in a hurry.

"I was not aware that I was having it, Mrs. Perkyns," said Joan, quite sweetly. "I am going to be married almost immediately."

"Oh, that's a horse of another colour. There, now, Maria, that only shows what vile gossips there are in Blankhampton. I never knew such a place in my life; gossip is a thing that I never indulge in. I heard it two days ago, and I took the first opportunity of coming and telling you direct, my dear, what I thought of it. You are going to be married at once?"

"Very shortly," said Joan.

"I am glad of that. I never like to hear of engagements hanging fire. People in the town seem to think that you are only getting married because you don't like to let a good match go by. I knew you were not the girl to marry from any such feeling as that, but you know Blankhampton people are very ill-natured, my dear, very ill-natured indeed."

It was on the very tip of Joan's tongue to say that greater ill-nature than Mrs. Perkyns's own had never been found within the walls of the old city, but she resolutely choked it down and replied peaceably enough.

"Oh, I don't know that people are so ill-natured," she said, "and it's natural to take an interest in one's neighbours' affairs. I know I do. The most disagreeable person I ever knew in my life was a lady who prided herself on never saying a word against anyone,

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and of always talking of things rather than of people—
weary, weary, weary,” she said, with a laugh. “However,
we’ve talked enough of my poor affairs. You’ll have an
invitation to my wedding before long, Mrs. Perkyns—you
shall have one of the first.”

“That’s where I think you so sensible, Joan,” said
Miss Maria. “You’ve got a mind above all this petti-
fogging backbiting. That’s where the world makes such
a mistake. I always tell you so, Charlotte—neighbourly
interest is one thing, picking holes is another. I always
did think you a dab at picking holes, Charlotte.”

“Really, Maria!” said Mrs. Perkyns. The good
lady’s face was flaming, but Maria, secure in her in-
come of eight hundred a year and never a soul to say
her nay, had no notion of being put in the background
by her older and very matronly sister.

“I quite thought when poor mother died,” Miss
Maria went on, “that I should stay all my life in Little
Besborough, but everybody—both those who belonged
to me and those who didn’t—seemed to think that
although I had managed everything for fifteen years, I
was absolutely incapable of buying a yard of stuff, or
even ordering my dinner, without outside help. So I
took myself out of Little Besborough, and thankful I
have been from that day to this. In London,” she went
on, “nobody seems to think it is at all a wonderful
thing that I should live in a house by myself; nobody
seems to think it is an outrage when I want to go to a
theatre, and I am quite sure nobody keeps count of

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how many bottles of beer and how many bottles of whiskey we use in a month. By the bye, I see you have got William still."

"Oh, William will stay with us as long as he lives, of course," said Joan. "We are all quite devoted to William, and William is quite devoted to us."

"I don't believe in the devotion of servants," remarked Mrs. Perkyns, with a lofty air. "It's against nature. Every single human being in the world has an instinct of serving his own ends—why should servants be any exception to the general rule?"

"I don't know why they should," said Joan, "but I am quite sure that William has very little thought of self beyond the legitimate attention which every human being ought, and does, pay to his own personality. And William has been with us so long, Mrs. Perkyns, that when we find out anything against him, I shall certainly begin to distrust my own father."

"Many a girl has had good cause to do that," said Mrs. Perkyns in a portentous tone. "No, my dear, I'm not saying a word against your father—Robert Delamere is much too old a friend of mine, and I have much too strong a friendly feeling for him, but girls have found out before to-day that their fathers are not everything that the whole world can desire, or that daughters can believe in."

"Don't croak, Charlotte," said Miss Maria.

CHAPTER XXXV

A SEAL

“**I** THOUGHT,” said Moresby to Joan, when she went back to the morning-room, “I thought that old woman was never going. I can’t imagine why you tolerate such a nuisance. ’Pon my word, I was strongly tempted to come and rout you out and show her to the door.”

“It was just as well that you didn’t,” said Joan, smiling up at him. “Mrs. Perkyns is a woman with an all-seeing eye. Nothing escapes her. She was perfectly aware that you were somewhere concealed in the house, and she determined to stay you out. I believe nothing but the pangs of hunger really drove her away at last, and the remembrance of what Mr. Perkyns would say if she were so late that his dinner was spoilt.”

“Good old Perkyns!” said Moresby. “Why do you tolerate such a woman?”

“Oh, I’ve told you, Ozzie—I’ve told you. She is an old friend. We are a patient family, we Delameres. We put up with all sorts of nuisances rather than dig them out by the roots and make a great ugly gap that nothing can ever bridge over. It’s like having a little mild toothache now and again—it’s a nuisance while it lasts, just a grumble, nothing worse, but it would be

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an awful wrench to have the tooth taken out. We feel like that with regard to Mrs. Perkyns. It would vex father—he has had enough to bear. We don't want to do anything that will vex him, and poor Mrs. Perkyns is comparatively harmless."

"I suppose she is. I call her an unmitigated nuisance myself. However, you and your family must arrange your own affairs. I hope you will not think it necessary to invite her to pay us a visit long after we are married?"

"Oh, Ozzie, how can you be so silly! The real truth was she came in your interest."

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours. She came to tell me that she considered I was an arrant fool to wait a year to be married."

"Gad! there's sense in the old woman, after all. Oh, I'll take back what I said—I'll take it all back. She must be a good old sort. How sensible of her! And what did you say?"

"I told her I wasn't going to have a long engagement, that we were going to be married immediately, and that she should have an invitation to the wedding."

They were both standing on the hearthrug, and Moresby bent down from his greater height and kissed her just as he had been used to do in the old days when they first loved each other.

"You needn't look at the clock," he said. "Come and sit down here and let us have ten minutes' talk

together. I have been so miserable these last few weeks."

"Oh, Ozzie!"

"I have. Somehow nothing has been the same; we have never seemed to be together as we used to be—at one with each other. I have felt, right down to this very afternoon, down to the very moment that old lady was announced, that there was a great wall of ice which had slowly risen up between us and would never, never, never melt, and that you and I would go down the long years with always that imperceptible something parting us. You have no idea how miserable I have been. But now you look like yourself, like the little girl that I fell in love with when I came to Billy Blake's wedding. You won't let that wall rise up again, will you?"

He drew her down on to the wide sofa as he spoke, himself leaning back a little against the luxurious cushions. But Joan sat bolt upright, some words of his beating to and fro in her brain, some self-reproach, some keen desire still gnawing at her heart. A sudden wave of compunction came over her, a feeling took possession of her that she would tell him the whole truth and leave it to his sense of honour to do what he thought best for them both.

Then she heard voices in the hall—the cool, audacious tones of David Molyneux, Violet's gay, giggling laugh, a quick protest from Agnes, and immediately a rejoinder from Sir Robert Masters. And in that instant the

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impulse passed. No, come what might, she would keep her secret. She had, it is true, turned from the man who had loved her so well and so faithfully to one who, in a few short weeks, had easily and without effort, transferred his affections from her to her sister. To tell would be to ruin everything. No, she would go through with it; she would try to bring herself back to the old feeling that she used to have for Ozzie Mainwaring. And then, moved by a sudden impulse, she turned towards him, and, bending, kissed him as she had never done in all her life before. It was a seal at once of renunciation and of resolve.

They were a strangely altered pair when they went up the stairs together obedient to the message of the dressing-bell. He stopped at the door of her bedroom and put his hand under her chin.

“Go and make yourself look lovely,” he said, in his fondest tones, “and when you look in the glass remember that you have made me the happiest man on God’s earth this day. I have been like a bear with a sore head for days past. What an idiot I am! I don’t know what there can be in me for you to care for at all.”

“Go and make yourself beautiful,” said Joan, with a little air of coquetry which carried him back to those bygone lovely days when they had spent so much time in the summer-house near the terrace wall, “and remember that you are not the only person in the world. Remember that other girls like other men, and other men like other girls than just you and I.”

Then she whisked into her room and shut the door quickly.

“Now, what the devil did she mean by that?” said Moresby to himself. “‘Other girls like other men, and other men like other girls than just you and I.’ Well, it doesn’t matter what she meant. She loves me—that is the one great thing of all.”

Meantime, Joan had walked straight across her bedroom to the toilet-table, and there she stood looking at herself fixedly. “You have made a mistake, Joan Delamere,” she said, looking sternly at her own reflection, “and now you have got only one course open to you from now to the end of your life. You have got to live so as to cover that mistake up, to forget that you have made it. It won’t be easy—it’s always difficult to live a lie, and in a sense it’s a lie that you are going to live. Still, if you have any pride, Joan, if you have any pity, you will live that lie so that in time you’ll come to believe in it yourself. Is that you, Bright? Am I late?”

“No, Miss Joan. I put you out the little black dress. Will you wear it?”

“No, not the black one to-night. I’ll wear the white *crêpe de chine*. Sometimes, Bright, one feels like wearing the blackest black that one has got in one’s wardrobe, and at others one wants to wear something bright, something gay and gaudy. To-night I feel that only the purest of pure white will be in keeping with my feelings.”

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"That's good, Miss Joan. You couldn't do better. You look bright enough."

"I'm glad of it. My looks never pity me," said Joan.

"You wouldn't want them to, Miss?"

"No, no, Bright, certainly not. I should like to look well to the end. Indeed, I don't know that I wouldn't like to be like that fine lady in the poem, who said:

"'One wouldn't sure look frightful when one's dead,
Here, Betty, give this cheek a little red.'"

"Oh, Miss Joan, what a horrid idea!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes, it is. But then, poor thing, she wouldn't be there to know whether they carried out her instructions or not."

Her simple toilet was quickly made, and she was deep buried in a book when Moresby went down to the drawing-room. The two girls followed hard upon his heels, but he sat himself down beside Joan with the assured air of her future husband.

"What are you reading, Joan?" he asked.

"I'm reading 'Vanity Fair.'"

"What!"

"Oh, I've read it before," she said, answering the implied astonishment and reproach in his glance; "I've read it before several times, but I never read it with such understanding as I do now."

“What do you understand from it?”

“Well, for one thing, I understand that Thackeray, great master as he was, had only one idea of colour, and that was pink. The girls had pink cheeks, they wore pink bonnets, they looked sweet in little pink frocks, they carried bunches of pink roses; Amelia wore pink ribbons, the men had pink ties—pink, pink, pink, it’s the dominant note of the story.”

“Now, I never noticed that,” said he.

“No, perhaps you wouldn’t,” said Joan, while Agnes from her standing-place on the other side of the hearth shot a glance at him, as much as to say, “Man alive, do you think that all wisdom and all erudition are combined in you!” And little Violet intercepted the look, and interpreting it at about its right value, laughed outright.

“What are you laughing at?” said Moresby.

“Oh, thoughts. I often laugh at my thoughts.”

“Indeed, that’s a cheap amusement.”

“Sometimes not so cheap, Ozzie; and sometimes it’s just as well that I keep my thoughts to myself.”

“I think,” said Moresby, deliberately, “that you keep your best thoughts for a certain young gentleman who is here a good deal.”

“Do you? Ah, you follow my example, Ozzie—keep your thoughts to yourself. It’s a grand plan.”

And then the dinner-gong boomed forth, and Mr. Delamere came quietly in, followed by Willy, who had dressed in a rush and now came hurrying in with a word

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of apology on his lips which he quickly turned into a breath of relief.

It was very late that evening when Robert Delamere said good-night to his children. "Joan," he said, putting his arm round her and drawing her close to him, "I have had it on my mind for days past to ask you a question."

"Dear Daddy, why didn't you ask it?" said Joan.

"Perhaps a little because I was afraid of hurting your feelings. I dislike people myself, as you know, dearest, who harrow up your feelings for nothing—I give them as wide a berth as I can. I shouldn't like any one of you to give me a wide berth on that account."

"We never shall," said Joan.

"No, I hope not. I fancied a few days ago that all was not well with you; but you look brighter, happier to-night."

"I am quite happy, thank you, Daddy."

"You are quite satisfied with this marriage?"

"Oh, how can you ask me?" she said. "Surely I should be the most ungrateful girl in the world if I were not. I am afraid, dear Daddy," she said, putting her hand up and smoothing his shoulder, "I'm afraid you will soon be bereft of all your little girls. After you have been so good, too."

"Well, if you go to good homes, my child, I shall be satisfied and content."

"You will be very lonely, Daddy, in that case. I—

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I think you will have another young man coming before long."

"Do you?"

"Yes—possibly two. And then, dear, if Norah stays out there, what will become of you?"

"Well, we'll meet that when the time comes," said Mr. Delamere quietly.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SOMEWHAT OF A SHOCK TO LORD MORESBY

IT is an old saying which runs, "Happy is the wooing that's not long a-doing," and in this old saw David Molyneux was a firm believer, for he conducted his wooing of Agnes Delamere with such speed that before he had known the family three weeks he had broken the ice, taken the fatal plunge, and had asked her to be his wife.

"I know," he said in the most humble and apologetic tones, when he had finally braced himself up to take the great step, "I know, Aggie darling, that by mere days and hours you and I have only known each other for some three weeks, but, after all, when you come to look at it in the light of common-sense, what is time? Compared with the great circle of eternity, what are three weeks, or three months, or three years? After all, the great thing with men and women is not the time they have known each other, but whether they love one another and are likely to love another for eternity. Now, I—I adore you, Aggie, and I know you adore me."

"Indeed you don't know anything of the kind," said Agnes, promptly.

"No, I don't *know* it—I admit I don't know it, but

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I want you to, and—er—you do like me, don't you? you wouldn't like me to go away and—er—go to the dogs, or marry another woman,—now, would you?"

"No, I shouldn't," said Agnes, honestly. "But you know, David, you are awfully young."

"I'm not awfully young. I'm twenty-four. I've been my own master ever since I can remember, and—er—I've heaps and heaps of money."

"How many times have you been in love before?" asked Agnes.

"Never. Give you my word of honour. Such an idea never entered my head. Gad! I should have married long since if I had."

"How do you know? She might have refused you."

"Well, she might, but I don't think she would."

"You conceited creature!"

"No, it isn't conceit; but I am a nice chap, you know, and I shouldn't dream of asking a girl to marry me unless I had a sort of idea she was likely to say yes."

"You mean to say you had a sort of idea that *I* was likely to say yes?"

"Yes, of course I had. I know you're awfully fond of me. What's the good of shamming? You'll tell me so to-day or to-morrow or next week. I might just as well be honest with you now. We won't have any beating about the bush, will we? My firm opinion is that there is nothing in the world like making up your mind and then carrying your intention out without the small-

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est hesitation or weakhandedness. I can't stand weakhanded people. That's why I like you so much. You are so definite, you know."

"Am I definite?"

"Oh, awfully definite. And you're such a darling, and you're so—oh, you're so honest, and a chap would feel so safe with you!"

"Sure of that?"

"Well, I rather think so. You are such a dashed honest family, and—er—I like your people, and altogether it's—er—just the right thing that we have decided to marry each other, don't you think so?"

It was perhaps one of the quaintest wooings that had ever happened since the beginning of time, but Agnes liked the inconsequent, rattle-tongued young soldier, and he had told her one or two incidents about his boyhood which had somehow made her long to give him a new experience of life.

"I say," he said, presently, when they had in a way come back to their senses again, "how will Masters take this?"

"Masters? Do you mean Sir Robert?"

"Of course."

"Have you any idea that you are cutting Sir Robert out?"

"Quite sure of it."

"Oh, how funny! My dear boy, Sir Robert doesn't care twopence about me. *I'm* not the attraction to Riverside."

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"Oh, come now! Nonsense. Do you mean to say it's little Violet?"

"Not at all."

"Not Joan? *Not Joan?*"

"Who else?" said Agnes.

"Well, I thought it was you. Naturally one thinks it's one's own girl. It's the most natural thought that I could have. H'm. Dear me! Joan. But what's the good of his hanging about here? Joan's practically fixed up with Moresby—almost as good as married to him, in fact."

"Yes. Well, it isn't me. I can't talk over Joan's affairs, even with you, yet, David. There's a screw loose there; whether it will ever be made right and tight is beyond my power to say. Don't speak of it, or hint it, or look it to anybody."

Now, it happened that Moresby had been up to town for a week, and on the very afternoon that David Molyneux was busy arranging his future with Agnes Delamere in the sanctity of the Winter Gardens, he was just arriving at Blankhampton Station. He was, of course, intending to stay at Riverside, and he stopped his cab at the door of the club that he might go in and find out if there were any letters awaiting him. Just as he came out to the cab again he saw Agnes and David Molyneux come out of the principal entrance gate of the Winter Gardens, which was exactly facing the door of the Blankshire's gentleman's club. Some things in this world are absolutely unmistakable, and the air of a

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newly-engaged couple is among them. It came upon Moresby with almost a shock when he realized that such was the truth. His first feeling was that Agnes had shown very little sense in choosing the boy Molyneux of the two.

“Frothy-headed creature!” his thoughts ran. “Fancy her being sister to my Joan! Why, it’s incredible! I shouldn’t have thought she’d have looked at that young chap, although everybody knows he has heaps of money.”

However, as he drove through the streets and drew nearer to his haven of rest, the incident passed from his mind, and his thoughts were fixed only upon the girl he would find at the end of the journey. As for Joan, she had schooled herself well. She received Moresby and half a dozen presents he had brought for her with such an admirable reflection of the past that he was more in love with her than ever.

“You are too good to me, Ozzie,” she said. “Why do you waste all this money on me?”

“You forget, little girl,” he replied, “it’s not a waste of money—quite the contrary; it’s good for trade.”

“Oh, how horrid of you!”

“Well, I shouldn’t have said it if you hadn’t almost put the words in my mouth. You must have things suitable to your position, and you must have pledges of my affection, and I must have some outlet to show you how utterly and devotedly I am yours for ever and always. I should be a poor sort of a lover if I couldn’t

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bring you a few presents—a few paltry trinkets and things of that kind—after being away from you for a whole week. Why, Joan, what do you take me for?”

She tried to say that she took him for what he was—the most generous man in all the world, but somehow the words would not come, and she was overwhelmed by a sense of her own baseness and ingratitude.

“Oh, Ozzie,” she said at last, “I am not fit for you, I am not half good enough for you, I am—you don’t know what a poor mean thing I am down at the bottom.”

“Thank you,” said he. “When you have done abusing my future wife, I should like some tea. I shall find out your defects quite soon enough, as you will find out mine, without our telling them to each other. Not another word, Miss Delamere, if you please. If it annoys you to have a few trinkets and things, why, I won’t bring you any more; but I never knew or heard of a girl in my life before that didn’t like to know that her sweetheart had thought of her when he was away from her.”

“Oh, I do!” cried Joan. “It’s only that you are so good to me, Ozzie, and I—I’m not able to do anything for you. I haven’t much money, and if I had it wouldn’t be any good giving you pins and things. Come, I’ll give you some tea.”

In spite of his great love for her, he could not help laughing at her distressed face. “Come, come,” he said, “surely you are distressing yourself most unneces-

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sarily. We shall have our ups and downs, I have no doubt, and we must bear with each other, but we needn't begin by being ready for the worst—you needn't begin by cutting me off from any expression of my love for you, and I certainly don't want to begin by hearing of any faults you may have—if you have them, which I stoutly refuse to believe. Come, give me some tea. They offered me some at Doncaster, and I refused it because I preferred to wait until I could have it from your hand."

"Oh, Ozzie!" she exclaimed.

She looked right away from him for a moment or so, and then she turned and humbly picked up the hand that was nearest to her and, before he could prevent her, had touched it with her lips.

He caught hold of her quite fiercely. "Joan," he said, hoarsely, "don't do that again!"

"Why?"

"I don't like it. It isn't the attitude I wish you to take to me. It isn't for you to kiss my hand, but for me to grovel at your feet from now to the end of our lives. It isn't for you ever to take the inferior place where we two are concerned, not for you ever to abase yourself to me. It's dreadful—horrible to me. Please never do it again, never as long as you live."

For a moment Joan was absolutely frightened. A fierce crowd of terrible thoughts came whirling into her mind—that she had mistaken this man after all, that he was as far above her as the heavens above the

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earth, that if he could see her as she was, with her naked soul stripped of all the charm and fascination of her personality, he would spurn her as she deserved.

“I didn’t mean it in that way,” she said. “I wouldn’t do anything to vex you for the world. Why should I? You have been very good to me—you always are—and you must forgive me. I didn’t mean it in that way quite.”

CHAPTER XXXVII

“ I THOUGHT——”

AGNES DELAMERE very demurely kept her own counsel as to what had happened that afternoon in the Winter Garden, and the first of the family to hear of it was when David Molyneux walked into Mr. Delamere's office the following afternoon and communicated the important event to him.

“ Well,” said Mr. Delamere, with an easy laugh, “ I won't say I am exactly surprised, though I didn't know which of them it was ; but I knew, of course, that you didn't come to Riverside to see me. So you want to marry Aggie, do you ?”

“ I do,” said David Molyneux. “ And, what is much more important, Agnes wants to marry me, strange as it may seem.”

“ Yes, you young people all go the same way, and a very good way it is. I never knew a day's happiness till I was married myself, and I've never known a day's perfect happiness since my wife was taken away from me. What I shall do when the last of my little girls is appropriated I don't like to think, and the worst of it is they all go away from the old place. I don't wonder at it ; there is a romance about change of venue, and they have known all the boys in the town too long.”

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“ Well, sir, perhaps you’ll get married again yourself,” said David, whose thoughts naturally ran to that as the easiest way out of the difficulty.

“ Get married again, eh? The idea never presented itself to me. I don’t think I shall do that. However, I’ve still got a little breathing space before little Violet will be asked for. Of course, you want to be married at once? Oh, I know. Well, I think I must ask you to wait a reasonable time. You see, we haven’t known you very long.”

“ Not very long, Mr. Delamere. Don’t keep us waiting too long. A long engagement is an awfully wearing thing to everybody concerned.”

“ How do you know?”

“ Well, honestly I don’t know—not from personal experience,” said David, promptly, and yet very modestly; “ but I had an aunt who was engaged seven and a half years, and I have heard her say that three months is the outside time that anybody ought to be engaged.”

“ Ah. Should you consider three months an outside time?”

“ Well, I think it’s long enough.”

“ Oh, you do? Well, we’ll talk of that another day. You don’t want to get the wedding-day fixed up just yet, I suppose? At least, if you do, I must ask you to wait a while and see how you get on together. I suppose you can keep Aggie as she has been accustomed to be kept?”

“ Oh, I’ve plenty of money,” said the young man,

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simply, yet in a tone which carried conviction with it, "I've plenty of money. I thought if I gave you the names of my solicitors they could arrange everything about settlements and that kind of thing. Then, I may take it," he added, rising, "I may take it that it's—er—that we have your consent?"

"Oh, yes. I see nothing to withhold it for."

"Thank you very much indeed, sir," said David. "Then, if you'll excuse me, I won't detain you any longer." He caught hold of Mr. Delamere's hand, wrung it hard, and the next moment was gone out of the room.

"Another of them!" said Mr. Delamere. "It begins to look very much as if I shall be left desolate in my old age. Well, I don't know that unmarried daughters in a place like Blankhampton are exactly desirable. Marry again. H'm. Well, well, well, we'll talk about that later on."

It was not very often that Mr. Delamere's daughters were in the habit of visiting him at the office,—never unless there was some fairly urgent reason. That afternoon, however, it happened that little Violet arrived in Delamere Court with a telegram which had been received at Riverside. She came into the large outer office like a sunbeam.

"Is my father there?" she inquired of the clerk nearest to the door, who happened also to be quite the junior one of the establishment.

"Yes, Miss Violet—this way."

“ Oh, don't trouble to come if he is alone. I'll go.” She went on towards her father's room, leaving the young man, who was little more than a boy, gazing open-mouthed with admiration after her.

“ May I come in, Daddy?” she asked.

“ Oh, is that you, Violet? Yes, come in,” he answered.

“ Here's a telegram,” said Violet. “ Joan said I'd better bring it down to you at once, as it might be important.”

“ Thank you, dear, thank you very much. Yes, it is rather important,” he added, just glancing over the flimsy sheet of paper.

“ Yes, Joan thought it would be. Daddy dear, you haven't got a spare sovereign about you, have you?”

“ I can give you a couple of sovereigns if you want them,” said her father, quietly.

“ Well, I do want them. You see, I'm—I've not been very wise in the way I've spent my allowance somehow.”

“ Well, my dear child, you can have a little extra money, if you want it. Here are three sovereigns. Will that do you?”

“ Oh, yes, darling. It's only for gloves and odds and ends, but I've still got the better part of the month to get over. Thank you *so* much!” She put her arm round his neck and kissed him. Mr. Delamere held her close to his side for a moment.

“ I suppose you know the news?” he said.

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"News, Daddy dear? No. What news?"

"What! She kept it to herself?"

"Who? I don't understand you."

"Aggie."

"What about Aggie?"

"Well, I've had a fine strapping young man here this afternoon who wants to marry Aggie—says Aggie wants to marry him."

"Sir Robert?"

"Sir Robert? No, by no means Sir Robert."

"David?" she exclaimed, in questioning tones.

"Yes, that same David. Violet, my dear child, Norah will never come home again as Norah Delamere. There's a letter from Eric which has just come, and as it was partly on business he addressed it here. He says Norah has got a flourishing love-affair on, and that he has taken my place and given consent for me."

"You don't mean it! And who's the man?"

"Oh, he seems to be a rich chap—squatter sort of fellow."

"Well, I must say," said Violet, "we are all doing very well in the way of money. I think I shall have to marry for love, just to show that there is no money-grubbing strain in the Delamere family."

"I wouldn't do that," said her father, smiling. "You know the advice of the old farmer—'Don't marry for money, but go where money is.' It's very sound, shrewd advice that. But you are in no hurry, little Violet."

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Remember you are all that I have left—or soon will be. You mustn't desert me just yet.”

Now, it happened that the day was extremely cold, with a biting northeast wind, and Violet, when she had popped in and out of a couple of shops hied her away back home, arriving at Riverside just as William and the parlour-maid were taking in the tea.

She went straight into the morning-room without taking off her things. “ Oh, Joan,” she said, “ I have got such news for you!”

“ Have you?”

“ Yes. Father has had a letter from Eric—it was half a business letter, so it went to the office—and Norah is engaged.”

“ What!”

“ Yes, Norah's engaged—somebody very well off—and Eric has taken Daddy's place and given his consent and everything, and they are going to be married at once.”

“ What is his name?” cried Joan.

“ I never asked, and Daddy never told me.”

“ And Norah has never written home! Fancy her losing the mail with such news as that. How horrid of her!” Joan cried.

“ I've got another piece of news for you, too.”

“ What's that?”

“ Another engagement.”

“ Oh, no!”

“ It's a fact.”

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"And who is it? Not Eric, surely?"

"Oh, no, not Eric. Much nearer home than that."

"You don't say so! Who is it?"

"It's Aggie," said Violet. "He's been there this afternoon getting Daddy's consent—everything is all settled and arranged for."

Joan shut her eyes with an involuntary shiver. So the blow had fallen. "Yes?" she said, inquiringly. The single word came out with a sharp hiss. "Yes?" she repeated.

"And if Aggie is married directly," went on Violet, "of course there will only be me left at home. Just think of it—*me* mistress of Riverside, the sole stay of poor Dad and Willy! Why, it's too awful!"

"And then if you get married, Violet," said Moresby, "what then?"

"I might, you know. There's never any telling. What would Daddy do in that case? He can't live at Riverside by himself, that's a certainty. Even William couldn't run the house, not without some sort of a mistress."

"Perhaps your father will marry again," said Moresby.

"Oh, no! No!" cried the two girls in a breath. "That father never will do—never," added Joan. "No, we shall have to take it in turns to come and stay a month, or two months, with him, all of us, excepting, of course, Norah, who, I suppose, will only come home for six months at a time once in two or three years."

“ I THOUGHT——”

“ But I’m not married yet,” said Violet, “ and by the time I’m married it’s not impossible that Willy may have got ideas of that kind. And if Willy marries a nice girl, she might as well live here as in a separate house.”

“ Good little Violet! That’s a neat idea. I shall take the first opportunity of suggesting it to Willy,” said Moresby.

“ Please don’t. He’d think it necessary to get married on the spot, just to meet future possible contingencies. And then I should have to knuckle under to Mrs. Willy—oh, thank you! Wait till I’m engaged before you put any ideas of that kind into Willy’s head, if you please. Besides, there’s no great hurry. The regiment hasn’t been here so very long, and if they stay two years Agnes and David may just as well live at Riverside as go on their own.”

“ Agnes and *who?*” cried Joan.

“ Agnes and David, of course.”

“ David?”

“ David Molyneux.”

“ But I thought——” Joan faltered.

“ Good heavens!” exclaimed Moresby. “ Do you mean to say that she’s taken young Molyneux in preference to Robert Masters?”

“ Agnes is engaged to David Molyneux,” said Violet.
“ Oh, here they are! Now for it!”

But it was not the newly-engaged couple; on the contrary, it was Robert Masters himself who came in, easy

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of demeanour as usual, asking if he might be given a cup of tea.

"Why, of course," said Joan, making room for him on the sofa beside her. "Have you been hunting to-day?"

"Yes. It isn't very satisfactory—ground's so awfully hard, and it's so cold. I came back quite early, after the first kill in fact—not that I know whether there was a second. Well, any news?"

"Indeed, there is news," said Violet. "Two of my sisters are engaged to be married."

"I knew one was," said Masters.

"Ah, that makes three. Two more."

"You don't say so! And which are they?" asked Masters.

"Well, the one you don't know—Norah, in Australia—and Agnes."

"Oh, then Molyneux has pulled it off, has he?" said Masters. "I thought it wouldn't be long."

Joan looked up at him with almost a gasp, and while Violet was volubly explaining to Lord Moresby that it was bad for him to take three lumps of sugar in one small cup of tea, she ventured to put a question to him in an undertone.

"Did you expect that she would get engaged to David Molyneux?" she asked.

"Of course I did. Anybody could see it might have happened any day the last week."

"I thought," said Joan, "I thought—that—that——"

“I THOUGHT——”

“What did you think?” he said, in the same undertone.

“I thought that you——”

“I? Good gracious, what a funny idea! Did you really? Miss Agnes and I are the very best of friends—close friends—confidential friends—but she no more thought for one instant of marrying me than I ever did of marrying her.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ROBERT MASTERS GRASPS THE TRUTH

FOR a few seconds after Robert Masters declared that he had never had any intention of asking Agnes to marry him, Joan literally did not speak. Sir Robert, who was naturally always more interested in her than anyone else who might happen to be in the room, turned and looked at her.

“Why, Miss Joan, you look quite tragic,” he said, speaking slightly under his breath. “Do you mean to say that you had made up your mind to dispose of me in that way? I grant you it would have been convenient, but that’s not my nature at all. I wanted the sun; I couldn’t have the sun. To put it plainly, the sun did not want me.”

She looked up involuntarily, and Robert Masters looked down at her, and in that moment he realized the truth, the whole truth—that the sun *did* want him, that it was some question of honour which had come in between them and threatened to part them for now and all eternity. He cast a swift glance at the others. Lord Moresby was still quarrelling with Violet, and at that instant the door opened and Agnes, followed by David Molyneux, came into the room, and was at once seized upon by Violet and Moresby, who subjected her to a

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shower of pitiless chaff. You know the kind of scene that takes place when a newly-engaged girl first appears among her relations with her *fiancé*? Well, being very young, and very happy, and very lucky, and troubled with no mistakes, no pasts, nothing to ripple the surface of their life's stream, the prospective bride and groom did not try in any way to shirk the inevitable volley of good-natured teasing which they found awaiting them. And as the fun settled down a little, and attention was taken somewhat off the situation by Violet ministering to them from the tea-tray, Robert Masters was able to speak privately with Joan.

"Joan," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "I must say something to you. Oh, you needn't look at them—they are not listening, they are all taken up with their own petty frivolities. Joan, I never realized the truth until this minute. I saw it in your eyes. You needn't attempt to deny it—you can't deceive me, Joan; you are making a big mistake. There is some question of honour that sways you. I know it—I feel it. I have felt it all along. You don't care twopence-ha'penny about Moresby."

"I do," said Joan. "I feel I am not half good enough for him. I—I did care for him—oh, I did, believe me—and then I took a wrong idea in my head. I thought it was that he didn't care for me."

"When?"

"That time when we were at Rockborough. You remember I got a letter from him—I—he didn't like to

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hold me to my promise, thought it wasn't really a promise. He felt that he would never be able to make a home that he could ask me to share, and I wrote and set him absolutely free, even from the implied promise that we had made to each other. And then he came in for the title and the money—life was all changed, everything was different. Oh, I can't talk about it."

"You *must* talk about it," he rejoined in the same fierce whisper. "You must talk about it. Do you suppose I am going to keep silent when my life is hanging in the balance? What is such a tie? If he were poor and you cast him off, it would be another thing; but he is rich; any girl in England would be proud to marry him. He's—he's a great catch; a much greater catch than I am, Joan. And yet, if you love me the best—ah, it's too hideous to think of your marrying anyone but me."

"I—I must," said Joan, with a gasp, "I must. You don't understand. I—I—oh, don't talk to me any more now. You mustn't."

"Later on," said he.

"No, no; not at all. There's nothing to be done. We must dree our weird."

"I won't dree my weird. I swear to you that you shall not marry Moresby without his knowing the truth, and the whole truth. When will you see me?"

"When can I see you? He's staying here in the house—he's always here. I'm never free for one moment."

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"Come down to the Winter Garden to-morrow."

"No, no; it's impossible. If I stir out of the house he naturally asks where I am going and mayn't he come, too."

"Does he go to church with you?"

"No, he never goes to church."

"Then, you come into the Winter Garden instead of going to church. They'll not miss you. The day after to-morrow. You'll come in the morning. You can go in quite late, and nobody will know that you haven't been there all the time. It isn't like an ordinary church, since you always go to the Parish—no, don't come to the Winter Garden; it will be closed. I've a better idea. I'll meet you in the north aisle—in the north transept, behind Archbishop Leng's tombstone—you know. Now, you won't fail me? If you do, I shall have no choice but to acquaint Moresby with everything that has passed between us."

"Nothing has passed," said Joan, "nothing has passed between us excepting that you asked me to marry you, and I told you I couldn't. I told you there was someone else."

"You never told me that you *loved* someone else." His voice was tenderness itself, his eyes all eloquence.

"Please," said Joan, in a little pitiful voice, "please don't say any more now. I'll come Sunday morning. I'll be there at a quarter past eleven. Don't wait about for me. Go right out of sight, behind the Archbishop's tomb—I'll come."

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She was true to her word. Afterwards she wondered how she had ever lived through that evening and the whole of the following day, lived almost entirely in Moresby's society, lived with that persuasive voice ringing in her ears, those eloquent eyes pleading for the life of love. And yet, so well did she play her part that Moresby discovered nothing. He tried hard on the Sunday morning to persuade her not to go to church—he almost decided to go himself, then remembered that he had a long letter to write to his lawyers, which he had promised should reach the London office early on Monday morning.

"I would go, darling," he said, "but I have got to write an awfully long letter all about settlements and things, that they can't arrange without me. What a nuisance these lawyer fellows are!"

"Now, you mustn't speak against lawyer fellows here," said she.

"No, no; not at all. But charming as your father is in his private capacity, I am quite sure he can be most aggravating as a lawyer. And the worst of it is," he added, quaintly, "the better lawyer the man is, the more irritating from a client's point of view. So you see, dear, if I go to church with you I shall have to write that letter in the afternoon, and I don't feel inclined to do that. Besides, when a man has been in the service as long as I have, he kind of feels a prescribed right to stay away from church parade Sunday morning."

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So Joan, who was purposely rather late, set off alone in the wake of her two sisters and Willy. Mr. Delamere had started a quarter of an hour before, he always preferring to take time on the road, speak to many people as he went, and sit for ten minutes in his accustomed corner of the big pew meditating before the beginning of the service.

And that morning Joan was late. It was, indeed, just a quarter past eleven when she passed in under the great north doorway, which was not a much used entrance, the majority of people entering by the southern or the western doors. Not a soul was in sight, not so much as a single vergers crept along the wide white pavement, so Joan, instead of going straight across to the side aisle by which late-comers could enter the choir, turned sharply to the left, and the next moment had joined Sir Robert Masters in his place of concealment behind the Archbishop's tomb.

"I ought not to have come," she said as they met.

"Oh, yes, you ought. It's your only chance of talking things squarely over with me, Joan. It's absolutely imperative that we do talk things squarely over. You don't seem to realize that."

"I don't think I realize anything," said Joan, "excepting that I have made a complete muddle of my life and yours."

"You bid fair to do so," said he; "but the mischief is not done yet. Oh, Joan, don't go and do this hideous thing. It's hideous for a woman to give herself to one

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man when her heart belongs to another. I should have spoken out before if I had been absolutely sure, but you have held me off so. You almost made me believe that you cared for Moresby more than you do for me—and yet, do you know, I don't think you ever quite made me believe that; but there were times when I wasn't sure—dead sure—how you felt with regard to him. Why did you take him when you knew that I loved you, and you knew that you loved me?"

"Because," said Joan, in a very small and pitiful voice, "because I thought that you had not been very sure of yourself. I was ashamed to care so much—I mean to think so much of a man who seemed to be so easily consoled. You have been a great deal with Aggie, you know."

"With your sister Aggie? Oh, no. In the sense that I have talked to her—yes, but talked to her about what? About you."

"About me?"

"Of course. What other topic of conversation should we have? I take no interest in her; she takes less in me. But she's no fool, that sister of yours; she knows the lay of the land well enough. She knows where your heart is. She said it all along."

"Agnes had no possible right——" Joan began.

"No, she had no right; but everybody has a right to see the truth, everybody has a right to use the eyes that were given to them, and to use them to see truth as well as what they were only intended to see. You mustn't

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blame Agnes—she's been your best friend. It will be difficult, Joan, oh, it will be very difficult. We shall have to make a clean breast of it to Moresby."

"And," said Joan, "if we do that we shall have to leave the final decision to him."

"I don't see it—I can't see it. Moresby is a gentleman. He wouldn't hold a woman to a promise given under a misapprehension, he wouldn't wish for a wife whose heart belonged irrevocably to another man. You wrong him."

"I must," said Joan, "leave the choice to him if—I if I make up my mind to tell him at all."

"There's no question of making up your mind. If you don't tell him, I shall. If you marry him, you must marry him after answering one straight question. Oh, Joan, I know it will be an awful moment for you, it will be an awful wrench—yes, yes, an awful wrench. But you will get over it, you will win through. The honest course is the best course all the world over. If I were in Moresby's place, I'd rather, fifty times fifty times, know the exact truth than live in a fool's paradise from which I might awake at any moment."

"But all this," said Joan, "does not in the least exonerate me."

"Perhaps not, perhaps yes. At all events, while your eyes tell me what they told me the other evening, it doesn't much matter what your lips say. I wonder Moresby never found out the truth."

"It was on the tip of Joan's tongue to say that he

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had more than once been within an ace of guessing it. Then a sense of what was due in honour to the man who held her promise choked the words upon her lips.

“I—I must go now,” she said. “I have been here long enough.”

“Joan,” said he, “you have not yet told me the truth, you have not yet owned that I am right.”

“You said,” returned Joan, “that it did not matter what one’s lips said so long as one’s eyes spoke the truth.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

A PRETTY FIX

“WHERE is Joan?” said Mr. Delamere, looking down the long table.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Violet answered.

“Have you seen her, Agnes?”

“No, I haven’t seen her this morning—that is, I saw her this morning at breakfast, of course, but I haven’t seen her since church-time. Have you, Ozzie?”

“I haven’t seen her since just before she went off to church. I didn’t know she was in; but then I’ve been writing letters. I don’t like writing letters,” he added, “so I thought as I’d begun I’d make a clean sweep of all I ought to do, and then I should be free for a week or so.”

“Oh, I’ll go and see where she is. Perhaps she’s not very well,” put in Agnes, hastily.

She laid down her serviette and pushed back her chair, going out of the room without another word. She ran quickly up the wide shallow stairs and knocked at the door of Joan’s room. There was no response. “Joan, open the door,” she said. “It is I—Agnes.”

“Go away,” said Joan’s voice from within. “I don’t feel well, dear. Go away. I don’t want any lunch.”

“Do let me in, Joan.”

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"No, no. Please don't worry me. I'm lying down. I don't want any lunch, I tell you."

So Agnes went back again to the dining-room. "Joan isn't very well," she said. "She's lying down with a headache. She doesn't want any lunch. Don't worry her."

"I had a sort of feeling she ought not to go to church this morning," said Moresby.

"Neither did she," said Mr. Delamere.

"She didn't go to church?"

"No, she was not in church."

"Oh, really. I thought she told me she was going to church, that was all."

Then Agnes plunged headlong into the conversation, turning it into another channel, and no more was said about Joan's indisposition. Twice Agnes went up to the door of her sister's room, and twice Joan declared that she was all right and only wanted to be let alone. At tea-time, however, Agnes positively insisted on the door being opened.

"Joan," she said, "if you don't open the door I shall fetch Moresby upstairs, and I'm sure you don't want that. I have brought you some tea, and I'm here by myself. Open the door immediately."

There was a moment's silence. Then she heard the sound of the key turning in the lock, the door opened and Joan stood before her. Agnes went quickly in, closing the door and locking it behind her.

"Joan," she said, putting her hand on her sister's

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shoulder when she had set down the tray upon the table by the bed, "I want to know what is the matter."

"Nothing that you can help," said Joan, averting her eyes.

"Nonsense. I can help it perhaps more than you think. What has happened this morning to you? Come, you may as well tell me. I've got to know. Something very terrible has come into your life—I know it, I've felt it all along. Have you and Robert Masters come to an explanation?"

For a moment Joan stood irresolute. Then she broke down, and, hiding her face with her hands, sobbed as if her heart would break.

"It's no use crying like that, darling," said Agnes, speaking very firmly. "It's no use crying like that. The worst has come to the worst—I knew it would, I knew it all along. You have made a mistake. I don't know what made you make it, because all along you have loved Robert Masters the best of the two."

"How did you know?" cried Joan between her sobs.

"How did I know? Child, do you think that I have eyes in my head? Do you think that I go about like a mole, and don't see things that are happening under my very nose? Pray, don't let there be any mistake. You have promised yourself to Ozzie Mainwaring and your heart is breaking for Robert Masters. Don't let it break. You couldn't do such a wicked thing to a man as to marry him when your heart was full of love

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for another. He wouldn't wish it. You have come to an understanding with Sir Robert, haven't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I have," said Joan, "I suppose I have."

"You *suppose*? Don't you know? Come, now, Joan, it's no use beating about the bush any longer. It's simply this—Ozzie Mainwaring has got to be told."

"But who is to tell him?" cried Joan, almost in a wail.

"Who is to tell him? Well, I admit it is rather an awkward thing. Don't you think you could bring yourself to do it?"

"No, I don't," said Joan. "I don't pretend that I can. I can't. I've behaved like a beast to him. I should think when he knows everything, he will be thoroughly glad to be rid of me."

"Not he. And yet," and here Agnes pulled herself up sharp, "and yet, perhaps he might. Men are so sensible in some situations of life. Anyway, he wouldn't thank you to marry him without telling him the truth, that is quite certain."

"No, I suppose not," said Joan, wearily.

"Well, now, look here," Agnes went on briskly, "you are feeling pretty bad over it just now, and I really can't wonder, but you can't be allowed to wreck your life for the sake of a mere idea—a shibboleth—that would be too foolish for words, and you wouldn't deserve to be happy afterwards if you did. Meantime, supposing that you drink the tea I have brought you. Come, you

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mustn't let yourself get run down—that can serve no purpose; neither man will want a starving shadow.”

By dint of coaxing and half chaffing she succeeded in getting Joan to drink a cup of tea and to choke down a bit of bread and butter, and then she persuaded her to lie down again while she bathed her forehead with eau de cologne and covered her over with the silken eider-down. She then returned to the lower part of the house, going to the drawing-room, where tea was in full swing.

“Is she better?” asked several voices at once.

“Oh, yes, she's better, but she's got a very bad headache. Don't worry about her. She's had some tea,” Agnes replied. She took her own tea from Violet, and was carrying it across to the other side of the room when Moresby intercepted her.

“Is Joan really ill?” he asked.

“She's got a very bad headache, Ozzie,” she replied. “I'll talk to you about it later on.”

Something in her tone made him turn and look strangely at her; but Agnes was not to be drawn into any discussion just then and immediately passed on to where David Molyneux was sitting.

“David,” she said, in an undertone, “I'm in the most awful fix that ever poor creature was in this world.”

“Why, what has happened?”

“Oh, I don't know how to tell you. In brief, all that I told you yesterday I suspected is absolutely a fact. Joan has got herself engaged to Ozzie Mainwaring—whom she used to be awfully fond of, mind—and all the

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time she's absolutely wrapped up in Sir Robert. They've come to some sort of an explanation this morning—when and where I don't exactly know, but some sort of an explanation—and she's up there crying her eyes out, and looks like a ghost."

"The devil!" said he. "I—I—beg your pardon. I didn't mean to say that, but really it is the devil, isn't it?"

"Well, it is," said Agnes. "This is just the question—somebody will have to break it to Ozzie. Who is that somebody to be? I don't feel inclined to do it."

"You'd rather do it than let your sister——"

"Oh, yes, I would. But still, David, you will admit it will take some grit to start, won't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it will. I'd no idea that Joan was changeable."

"She isn't. This is just the truth: Ozzie went away; he made love to Joan for years—yes, he did—and Joan, poor dear, hadn't the strength of mind to say: 'Well, you're no good. You are just taking advantage of me,' as she might have done, and as indeed she ought to have done. Poor Joan, she was wrapped up in him. And then from what I can gather, and from what few words she let out just now, I think when he found how dead poor they were likely to be, he wanted to cry off. Well, Joan was only too thankful to cry off, and she at once set him free. Meantime she had formed a splendid estimate of Robert Masters's character, in which I think she was perfectly right; and when Ozzie suddenly came

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home Lord Moresby, fifty thousand a year, and all the rest of it, she was so taken aback that she didn't like to say no."

"But what about Masters?"

"Well, do you know it was really very stupid, but I gather—mind you, she didn't tell me exactly—but I gather that she had an idea that Robert Masters was thinking about me. Now, the poor fellow has never had a thought but for Joan in his life, and it was not until you and I got engaged that she realized that Robert and I were nothing more than friends and would-be brother and sister. Now he has spoken out, and I think she's in that position that she simply doesn't know which way to turn."

"Well, of course Moresby's got to be told," said he, having but scant pity for a man in Moresby's particular circumstances.

"Yes; but who's to bell the cat? Joan says she can't; Robert says if she doesn't, he will; and I've left her thinking I'm going to do it."

"You? Well, I should think you would be a very likely person to do it."

"Oh, David, how horrid of you! Of course, I'll have to do it if the worst comes to the worst; but think what a horrid thing for any girl to have to do, particularly when I know it's mostly my fault and that Robert Masters has been encouraged by me all along."

"Oh, then you haven't carried on with Robert Masters?"

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"Never in my life. He confided all his trouble to me months and months ago, before I ever set eyes on you—in fact, it was through me it came about. I told him that Joan was miserable in her engagement, and she seems to have mistaken our intimacy, and other people, too; they are so silly in this place—they have an idea that if a man or woman speak to each other that they must be making love; they can't even be talking about the love-affairs of others. It makes me wild!"

"Yes, I can quite understand that. But still, Moresby ought to be told without delay. It isn't fair to keep the chap here—particularly under the same roof—a single hour without his being enlightened to the very fullest extent."

"Oh, I know that. I am prepared to do it—only I really do feel such a hesitancy. I never felt so sick about anything in my life. Oh, how unlucky Joan has been! Really, I haven't very much pity for Moresby. Besides, he's very rich now, and he's very good-looking, and he can easily find somebody else when he's got over this a little. But it's such a cold-blooded thing to do, isn't it?"

"Well, it is that—yes," he replied. Then a bright thought struck him. "Look here, Aggie," he said, "I don't like putting myself forward, but, at the same time, if you particularly wish it I'll go and find Moresby, and, as man to man, I'll tell him exactly what has happened."

"Oh, David, David," said she, "if ever a saint trod the earth, I think you are one!"

CHAPTER XL

THE ONLY WAY OUT

WITH David Molyneux to decide was to act. He left Agnes at the foot of the stairs, Agnes turning and flying back to the upper floor as if she were possessed of some demon.

David went straight into the morning-room, where he knew Moresby was. Violet and Willy Delamere were there, and another young man who was an ardent admirer of Violet's.

"Moresby," said David to him, as soon as he could speak without attracting attention, "it's very stuffy indoors to-day."

"Do you think so?" said Moresby.

"Yes, I do. Come outside and smoke. There's a nice little arbour down by the river," he added. "We can smoke there without disturbing anybody."

"I didn't know that smoking in this house ever disturbed anybody," said Moresby, in rather a grumbling tone.

"Never mind. Come out."

He was so much impressed by the younger man's manner that he obeyed him without any further demur. When they reached the hall, however, he hesitated.

"Agnes said she would go and see how Joan was getting on," he said.

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"She's been. Joan is rather better. I just saw her," David Molyneux replied.

The two men walked down the garden together. It was rather dreary than otherwise, for the flower-beds were bare and bleak, and there was not a leaf upon the trees with the exception of the evergreens which skirted the lawns.

"Now, I regard this as one of the best and most sheltered spots in Blankhampton," said David, as they turned into the summer-house on the terrace.

"Yes, it's a nice little place," Moresby replied. To him the little shelter was redolent of all the romance of his life; the walls spoke to him of Joan, the rustic seats seemed still to have a touch of her upon them; being midwinter, the cushions which were always there in summer time had been stowed away in the house, but still there was a feeling of Joan about the place, a feeling of romance, a thrilling sense of her personality.

"Now, look here, Moresby," said David, plunging headlong into the subject as only a very young man could, "I didn't bring you out here to smoke the pipe of peace or the cigarette of gentility. I have got something to tell you."

"To tell me?" Moresby's tone was faintly surprised.

"Look here, old fellow, if you had to take a facer, would you take it straight or would you have it broken to you?"

"I'd take it straight," said Moresby. "But what facer can you have to give me?"

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“Well, I’m afraid, old chap, I’ve got an awful facer for you. The real truth is, Joan is very unhappy. I don’t know what you and she were to each other in by-gone days, but there was some sort of an affair between you.”

“Well?” Moresby had turned white to his very lips, and he sat down upon the broad ledge which formed the window-sill of the shelter and grasped one of the wooden supports of the roof with which to steady himself. Only the strained white skin over his knuckles showed how nervous he was.

“There was some sort of an affair between you,” went on David. “As far as I can gather from Agnes, the situation lies simply in this: You went away leaving Joan free, and remaining free yourself. She had no communication with you, and another man fell in love with her.”

“Another man—another man fell in love with her?”

“It is not unlikely, old fellow, that another man would do what you had done. Anyway, he did. He proposed to Joan, and Joan, although in the ordinary course of events she would have accepted him, refused him because she did not feel herself to be absolutely free. Just at that time, or a few weeks later, she had a letter from you in which, practically, you put a final end to any implied promise that there might have been on either side. Joan accepted this situation, but before she could hear from you, you turned up with a title, with untold wealth, and you laid them at her feet. Now,

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the simple truth is this: Joan is breaking her heart for the other man. She refuses to throw you over, or even to tell you herself how she feels, but Agnes and I and the man feel that it is your right to know. Joan leaves the decision to you. If you insist, I mean to say if you wish that she should carry out her engagement with you, she will do so."

"And if I set her free?"

"Then she will marry the other man at once. I am sure, Moresby, you will—you will feel in any case that I have done the right thing in coming to you. Aggie promised to do it, but she was so upset and so distressed about the whole thing that I volunteered to do it in her stead. For my own part, I am free to confess that if I had to take a facer like that, I'd rather take it from a man than from a woman. I hope you'll—you'll——"

"Oh, put all that away," said Moresby. "You needn't apologise to me, David. I—I think it is very good of you to have bothered at all. The main fact is that the whole thing is my own fault. I ought to have read between the lines when I came back and she wasn't willing to be married right out of hand. She loved me when I went away, and I—well, I gave her the impression that I did not love her well enough to risk poverty. She had never known poverty—I had never known anything else. I—I mistook her. Look here, old fellow, I'll—I'll go. Would you see my man when he comes in and ask him to get my things all

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packed up and follow me to London—my own chambers in St. James's?"

"And Joan? You don't want to see her?"

"I—I think on the whole I'd rather not," said Moresby. "It will be harrowing to her feelings and most repugnant to mine. The main fact is enough for me. She—she has—I won't say she's changed her mind. I don't want to abuse the one woman in the world that I would give everything I have to call my own. She has grown out of the old feelings; I daresay it is natural enough. Would you do me the favour, David, to give her my love and to tell her I would rather she were happy in her own way? She needn't worry about me—I suppose I shall get over this after a time. If I don't—well, there's no reason for three to be wretched, as we would have been if I had held her to her promise. Do ask her not to send me back the odds and ends I have given her. I always think that is so dreadful. I'd rather she would keep them to remind her that, although perhaps I didn't care for her in just the way that she would have preferred me to care for her, yet I was very faithful according to my lights."

"I will attend to it all," said David.

He was very considerate, this boy. Like all inconsequent people, he was extraordinarily delicate about the feelings of others. I don't know whether you have ever noticed, my reader, that light-hearted, almost feather-brained, people often skate over thin ice which would break under the firmer and more solid tread of a wiser

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nature. He was apparently engrossed in tying knots in a bit of twine, and never once looked at Moresby, who was still sitting on the ledge of the shelter, holding the support firmly by one hand.

"If you will stay down here," Moresby went on, "I'll go up and get my coat and so on, and I'll go out without saying good-bye to anybody. I'd rather, I never could stand pity of any kind, and I don't want to see Agnes or any of them. Give me ten minutes' start and then I shall be all right. You can tell them why."

He stood up and gave himself the characteristic shake of the army man, straightened his shoulders, flung his head in the air, and then held out a strong, firm hand to David.

"Good-bye, old chap. I take it awfully kindly of you to have broken this to me so straight and so decently. I shall never forget you. I hope you will be awfully happy in your marriage."

"And I hope," said David, "that one of these days you will meet some girl who will make you feel that all the rest of your life has been mere dust and ashes, and that——"

"No, you needn't tell me, thanks. I know. If I do, I will write to you, David, at once, and I'll honestly tell you if I find happiness."

He gripped David's hand again, and then, turning, went out of the summer-house.

"There goes a fine chap, but he took her the wrong way," David Molyneux's thoughts ran. "Yes, he took

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her the wrong way. It comes, exactly as he said, of the fact that she has never known poverty and he has never known anything else."

He did not go into the house until he had finished his pipe, and that took a good deal longer time than ten minutes. Then he went slowly up the deserted garden paths, and, knocking the ashes out of his pipe at the hall door, he went into the house. The party in the morning-room had been augmented by several young people. Agnes had come down, and was one of the gay group by the fire. Some expression on her *fiancé's* face made her leave the circle and go to the great arch of the bay window.

"Have you told him?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"Yes, I told him. He's gone."

"Gone! Left for good? Is it all over?"

"Yes, all over. He took it splendidly. Mind you, it was a facer. I—I never felt such sympathy with a chap in my life."

"And his things?"

"Oh, he's given me instructions about them. I've got a message for Joan."

"Well, you had better come up to her room and give it to her."

She led the way across the hall and up the wide stairs.

"Joan, can we come in?" she asked.

"Who is it?" asked Joan.

LITTLE JOAN

"It's only David and I. David has a message for you."

She beckoned to David to enter the room, and he found Joan sitting in a big basket chair in front of the fire, her face very wan and tear-stained, her whole air that of a woman crushed by dire grief. Then, standing up quite straight and soldier-like, David delivered his message word for word.

There was a long silence. "Did he ask——?" Joan began.

"He asked nothing, and I did not tell him who the other man was, if that is what you mean."

"Sir Robert is coming up the drive," said Agnes.

"I can't see him," said Joan. "Go down—send him away. I can't see him."

"You—you are not going to break with both of them—you are not going to be foolish?" said Agnes in a frightened voice.

"Oh, no, that would be foolish indeed. But I couldn't see him just now. Tell him to go to town for a few days. I'll see him when he comes back again."

POSTSCRIPTUM

On February 1, at the Cathedral, Blankhampton, by the Very Reverend the Dean, Sir Robert Masters, Baronet, to Joan, third daughter of Robert Delamere, of Riverside, Blankhampton.

THE END

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